

# Performance Descriptors - Qualitative Assessment of the Product of Students' Activity in Primary School

Ana-Maria PLEȘOIANU<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> București, România

[pleșoianu.anamaria28@yahoo.com](mailto:pleșoianu.anamaria28@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** *Focusing education on competences is a major concern today. The evaluation of the school acquisitions, of the students' competences, becomes an important and difficult task. We can no longer afford to evaluate by asking for the restitution of knowledge and / or the application of isolated skills, but it is necessary to confront students with complex problem situations and ask them to solve them by mobilizing all that they have learned.*

*According to the hypothesis of this research, if each school product will be evaluated on the basis of benchmarks that will be broken down into a set of performance indicators, each of them has performance descriptors, they will ensure the uniformity of the evaluation conditions, beyond the variety of conditions in which the education is carried out.*

*The first purpose of the research was to identify how teachers for primary school can provide a unitary assessment for students, nationally, if the process and product of education or learning is related to the curricular and performance standards established at the national level.*

*The results indicate that, it is not easy for the teachers to evaluate the competences of the students, because they do not know very well about what complex of situations reveal the learning achievements so they can estimate the level of students in mastery of competences.*

**Keywords:** *competences; assessment; performance; standards.*

**How to cite:** Pleșoianu, A. -M. (2021). Performance Descriptors - Qualitative Assessment of the Product of Students' Activity in Primary School. In O. Clipa (vol. ed.), *Lumen Proceedings: Vol. 16. ATEE 2020 - Winter Conference. Teacher Education for Promoting Well-Being in School. Suceava, 2020* (pp. 360-368). Iasi, Romania: LUMEN Publishing House.  
<https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc/atee2020/24>

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1. From quantitative evaluation to qualitative evaluation*

Currently, it is desired to replace the traditional paradigm of quantitative evaluation, based on maximum objectivity, with qualitative evaluation. For this purpose, in the context of assessment based on competences, the standards to which the student's learning outcomes are related must be of a qualitative nature.

From the perspective of the complementary methods of evaluation, the content of learning, but also of the descriptors of performance, a precise structure of the learning contents is required and a clear understanding of the training levels (specific performances and capacities according to the needs of the program, but also moral qualities) that students must reach to ensure the consistency of the learning process. In evaluation it is not enough to define the performance indicators, we need to transition from the "control" of the performance to the „management” of the performance: norms set from outside versus norms established in the process.

Acceptance of the assessment, according to which the emphasis is shifted from understanding assessment as examination and control to school assessment increasingly conceived as an integral part of the learning process (Abernot, 1996, p. 5) is predominant and has accompanied the evolution of the concept of formative evaluation, being also associated with cognitive psychology. It also marks the shift from the quantitative, predominantly summative, to the appreciative, qualitative assessment.

The modern assessment is integrated in the learning process, which determined the distance of the evaluation from the traditional knowledge evaluation. Professor Ioan Cerghit defines this process as: „The evolution of the evaluation system has followed and follows the course of the changes of conception and methodology that take place (at the moment) at the level of the whole education system” (Cerghit, 2002 , p. 292).

In conclusion, we can say that the modern assessment has been delimited by the notions of examination, orientation, selection, because it has a strong social orientation, through its remedial and improvement effects of the teaching-learning process, which determines the reevaluation of the school's mission. Ion T. Radu, considers that “the evaluation action is part of the whole of the education theory or more precisely the theory of evaluation - as a system of concepts, principles and techniques regarding the measurement and appreciation of the school results and the teaching process” (Radu, 1995).

## 2. Research questions and aims of the research

Prof. Marin Manolescu consider that evaluation is “the activity through which value judgments are issued about the process and product of student learning based on pre-determined qualitative criteria, in order to make decisions according to the significance given to the evaluation step: improvement, selection, certification etc” (Manolescu, 2010, p. 26).

Each skill benefits from acquisition levels (or levels). The evaluator must identify behaviour observed in students, which should be strengthened/maintained, developed or improved. Most of the time, in the classroom, the teacher must appreciate objectively or as objectively as possible the qualities of the student, but does not have the right instruments. But even in situations where it has the necessary tools, they are questionable, they can be questioned in terms of objectivity of the performance of each student.

The appreciative evaluation is oriented mainly to quality. The dominant intention is not to measure, to present the student's performance, but to determine its value. But for this we need to "model" and "to model" evaluation (Mottier & Figari, 2012, p. 98).

In any case, the formative appreciation has at purpose to recognize where the student is facing a difficulty, in what it consists and to inform it about those found. This appreciation is not expressed in notes and even less in scores. This is feedback for the student and the teacher.

The appreciative evaluation, the performance descriptors (introduced in 1998), is oriented mainly to quality. The dominant intention is not to measure but to determine its value.

„The performance descriptors are the norms / standards of appreciation of the product achieved / the result” (Manolescu & Frunzeanu, 2016, p. 37). They reflect what the student needs to know and do in order to obtain a certain result. Based on the performance descriptors, the quality of the evaluated product is evaluated, having the function of standard. They ensure the uniformity of the evaluation conditions, beyond the variety of conditions in which the education is carried out. In order to ensure a unitary assessment of students, the process and product of education or training must be related to the curricular and performance standards established at the national level. For these reasons, the curriculum and the evaluation must be approached in solidarity, in unity, in interdependence.

The foundation of the evaluation of the school progress of the students in the primary cycle is based on the curricular / learning standards, specific to this level of education.

The assessment at primary level is conditioned by the achievement of the profile of the graduate student at the end of the fourth grade. The development of the competence of these categories of students has its own dynamics. A competence is built progressively, it is a process, it implies an ascending dynamic.

Performance descriptors are the most faithful and relevant expression of understanding of school competence in this way. In order to ensure a correct and unitary assessment, the learning process and product of each student must be related to the performance standards established at national level. The personal / individual performances must be evaluated according to the degree of proximity or distance of these units with standard value.

O.1 highlighting the importance of emphasizing the appreciative-qualitative side of the evaluation in the disciplines provided in the curriculum for primary education.

O.2 questioning the opinion of the teachers in the primary education regarding the design and development of the didactic approach (purpose, formative valences, evaluated content, the efficiency of the evaluation forms / tools) in order to highlight the qualitative-appreciative side of the evaluative approach.

O.3 identifying the opinions of the questioned population (groups of subjects: principals, teachers, parents, students) regarding the opportunity to evaluate at levels given by the learning results in primary education as an alternative to the classical (qualifying) quantifications of the school progress of the students.

Primary hypotheses:

I.1. If in primary education the evaluation follows the learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, competences), then the evaluative approach is more efficient.

I.2. If in primary education, along with the acquisition of knowledge, autonomy will be encouraged along with the development of emotional skills, then the quality of the motivation of the students to perform in activities will increase, and the degree of satisfaction and appreciation of their parents will be higher.

### **3. Research methods**

#### ***3.1. Participants***

The questioned categories are chosen from two perspectives:

- the subsequent possibility of the transfer of conclusions (Stănculescu, 2002, pp. 104-105),

- the theoretical dimensions of the object of the research.

Therefore, the sampling is of theoretical value, the research being directed to its purpose, not to the population in question. However, the representation in the educational space, which the questioned categories have in the educational process, gives the research the possibility of generalizing it theoretically, being concomitant and a useful practice that can be "replicated" in other contexts.

From the perspective of the sample size / representativeness, we consider that the research will have coherence and consistency in the dimensions of the sampled categories, this if we look the categories of samples questioned (four), the spread / origin (two residential environments), the place where they activate (the impact on the research: students - the urban environment, the rural environment, the teachers / directors - the urban environment, the rural environment, parents (two residence environments).

### ***3.2. Materials and instruments***

The Focus group method offered the participants the opportunity to get involved in evaluating the significance of the information obtained and, subsequently, in the intervention and change effort proposed by the discussed topic.

It will be used as a qualitative research method on the educational approach of the disciplines in the primary education from the perspective of the evaluation through levels given by the learning results (knowledge, skills and competences acquired).

The use of this method was subsequent to the application of opinion questionnaires, in support of reinforcing / verifying the researched concepts and for invigorating the research.

The application of the method had two approaches: from the perspective of the „problem" investigated and from the perspective of the „solution / solutions" offered.

It was followed:

- positive attitudes changed
- spontaneity
- honest disclosures
- conflict or competition to find opposing points of view
- uncensored input of participants
- examining values
- evaluating the consequences, advantages and disadvantages of the choices made (beside Iluț, 1997, p. 95).

As a complementary method of research, „systematic investigation based on a previously developed plan, helped of appropriate tools, actions and interactions, attitudes and behaviors, relationships and processes between and through which students pass in order to obtain relevant information regarding the personal changes and the school progress registered by them ”(Stănciulescu, 2005-2006, p. 7).

Qualitative analysis of the official curricular documents: educational framework plans, National curriculum, Methodological guides, helped defining the target values

The methodological focus aimed assessing the attitudes, dispositions, interests, motivation, aspirations and behavior of the student.

### ***3.3. Procedure***

The connection between the data obtained and the goals / objectives of the research implies correlation, and approach from different quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

The processing, analysis and interpretation of data was made "iterative": reading and annotation, classification and categorization (establishing categories and attaching data), linking and linking acts, judging the overall data and the relationships between them, elaborating the research report that validates hypotheses) (Iluț, 1997, p. 162).

For the nominal variables, the usual statistical indicators (distribution and structure of responses) has been used. For the quantitative items, the statistical indicators that provide information on the tendency of the characteristics (averages, dispersion degree) has been followed.

## **4. Results**

### ***4.1. Questionnaires results***

The connection between the data obtained and the goals/objectives of the research implies correlation, and approach from different quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

Regarding the group of subjects / the sample of teachers of the discipline, the teachers with a seniority in work of more than 9 years, degree I, and work in the urban environment are predominant.

The parents who answered the questionnaires, mostly graduated from high school, and live in urban areas.

The fourth grade respondent students was mostly 10 years old and study in an urban school unit, while the third grade sample respondent students are mostly 9 years old, and are contained in an urban educational unit.

The supposed change / modification could be noticed: the students reacted positively to the new evaluation conditions, approached the tasks proactively and involved, the announcement and application of the new instrument being prioritized with interest and curiosity and treated seriously.

We consider that the „negotiation“, the clarifications made by the teacher, also mattered.

Attitudinal-behavioral changes were identified for students who did not have a high level of acquisition before applying the performance descriptors.

#### ***4.2. Focus group results***

The focus group took place online, using Google Meet, the meeting being announced in advance of the 9 participants. The application / research device was ensured by registration / recording (on which the participants were informed and accepted) and the presence of two other people who contributed to the efficient realization of the meeting.

The nine participants represented different socio-professional categories and were selected from the perspective of the approach / involvement / beneficiary criterion of the evaluation approach in the public school.

The selection of participants also was based to the balance of knowledge / expertise in the issue discussed: people who know the specifics of formative evaluation, people who are involved in the evaluation process, but have no decision-making power, people who directly / indirectly / occasionally benefited from evaluation results training of students. Each of the participants offered expertise from various roles / statuses (teacher and parent, school principal / inspector / mentor and teacher, student / practitioner and practitioners / parent).

#### ***4.3. Analysis of the curricular documents results***

The qualitative analysis of the curricular documents contributed to the understanding of the legal framework based on which the evaluative approach to primary school subjects in state schools in Romania is carried out, fundamental sources were consulted (Romanian Constitution), organic (LEN), subsequent (Laws, Protocols , Order of the Minister).

### **5. Discussions**

The efficiency of evaluation with the help of current forms and means, traditional or modern, reflective, dynamic, individual or group, is known, tested, we believe that it may not provide a complete picture of the interventions needed to ensure school progress.

These results can be interpreted in favor of building a guide to performance descriptors that, through given skill levels, should most objectively reflect the school progress of primary school students and appreciate the quality of the way it has been achieved.

This guide would highlight the formative-qualitative dimension of the evaluation.

It is a debated topic for evaluation in primary education, but it is one highlighted by practice and it is a reality, because research and practice develop simultaneously, feeding each other

## 6. Conclusions

The research conclusions are the results of the six research directions that suggest the following:

- beyond the knowledge transmitted through the educational approach, the training and development of other key competencies are pursued;

- the students' interest is focused on cognition, the acquisition of knowledge, the evaluation being done accordingly. This finding - in fact, a limit, a shortcoming of school curricula - can be a reason for focusing the teaching approach on the formation of skills starting from the knowledge transmitted to students, putting them into practice, their assimilation as values. It is also interesting (in terms of pedagogical research) and important to show how much content in the curriculum targets cognition and how much behavior, how much can be measured and how much can be appreciated;

- there is a formal shortcoming of the didactic approach, that of the too static aspect lacking the dynamism given by the promotion of the contribution of the other actors of the educational process: the students;

- the answers of the interviewed students show a great uncertainty regarding the motivation for the grade, but also the certainty of the usefulness for life of the acquired knowledge;

- there is no very commonly used assessment tool. However, there is also a tendency to abandon the traditional form of assessment for forms of assessment that focus on the student's activity and expression, not only the knowledge acquired, but also his beliefs, attitudes, skills (systematic observation of student activity and behavior, the project, the portfolio);

- the desire of parents who want students to be evaluated through formative evaluation. We can interpret that this assessment best reflects the students' skills.



## References

---

- Abernot, Y. (1996). *Les methodes d'evaluation Escola*. Nouvelle edition, DUNOD. p. 5.
- Cerghit, I. (2002). *Alternative and complementary systems of training*. Polirom. p. 292.
- Iluț, P. (1997). *Social psychology and sociopsychology*. Polirom.
- Manolescu, M. (2010). *Theory and methodology of evaluation*. Editura Universitară.
- Manolescu, M., & Frunzeanu, M. (2016). *Innovative Perspectives of the evaluation in the primary education*. Editura Universitară. p. 37.
- Mottier, L. L., & Figari, G. (2012). *Modeling de l'evaluation en education*. De Boeck Superior.
- Radu, I. T. (1995). *Didactic*. Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.
- Stănciulescu, E. (2002). *Sociology of family education* (Vol. I). Polirom.
- Stănciulescu, E. (2005-2006). *Qualitative Methods, Course*. București.