

# Tattooed souls. Learning about assessment based on experience

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## ABSTRACT:

In this article the author reflects on the importance of the role that experience plays in assessment processes. He questions the repercussions that this experience has on learning in the teaching profession and the future assessment practice of the teachers. Does experience influence their professional practices, improving them? Do future teachers learn from the good and the bad aspects that resulted from their assessment? What conditions would help this happen? How can people who have endured severe, arbitrary and irrational assessments repeat the same mistakes, as if nothing had happened, as if they had not learned anything?

The author defines these experiences as tattoos on the soul because they leave psychological marks that remain engraved for a long time, sometimes for a whole lifetime.

Using a question asked to his pupils — *what was the most significant thing that happened to you when you were assessed by the education system?* — the author studies the experiences they relate and the repercussions on their academic life and professional training. The author focuses on a facet that is often silenced: that related to the world of emotions and feelings.

## KEYWORDS:

Assessment, Experience, Learning, Teachers.

## OPENING THE DOOR

Assessment is one of the most decisive aspects of the curriculum, given that it affects the whole learning process and is impregnated with ethical, social and psychological dimensions and not merely didactic factors. Understanding what assessment is and carrying it out well would be an excellent way to improve teaching practices in schools, so long as the assessment is viewed as a complex process of comprehension and explanation, and not just a simple mechanical act of attributing grades (Santos Guerra, 1993, 1998).

It is known that two kinds of values are attached to school knowledge. One, a usefulness value, which translates its utility, relevance, meaning, the importance that this knowledge has in people's lives. This kind of value, often the subject of so much discussion, opposes the bruising argument of an exchange value. This consists of the exchange that can be obtained, through the demonstration that knowledge has been acquired (whether or not this knowledge is useful), through a grade, and later, through a certificate or qualification. This twofold value leads us to ask the following question: What is truly important? The design of the practice, the organisation of the institutions and the undertaking of assessments have empowered, to untold limits, the exchange value of the academic knowledge. Fed by the system, the pupils are convinced that what is important is to pass the year, rather than to learn.

To enable the professionals to carry out a strict and authentic assessment, in the words of my dear Chilean friend Pedro Ahumada (2005), the initial training has to be grounded on a theoretical and strategic basis that serves to illuminate the practice. I know that the conditions, structures and bad habits make it very difficult to put the theories and strategies learned into practice, but without them, and however good the conditions are, it is very complicated to arrive at rich and innovative practice in the assessment field.

It is interesting that after so many years of assessment experience (subject to the inevitable assessment carried out inside the education system), those who later turn into assessors make the same mistakes, which can be considered irrational and harmful. This fact led me to ask the following question: what is it that makes us learn with experience? It is not sufficient just to have it, or to analyse it. The same experience enables some to learn, while it makes others more stupid. It is stimulating for some, while others are indifferent to it. In my assessment lessons, of future teachers, I usually dedicate one session to reflection, carried out by the pupils, about what they have experienced and are experiencing as people who are being assessed. In other words, I motivate them to read what is written within themselves, and to decipher the tattoos engraved in their souls.

In these sessions, as we will see, the pupils usually bring up serious mistakes, regrettable injustices and alarming incongruence. Will they repeat these events when they are teachers? This question has

two complementary dimensions. On the one hand, it asks what has been learned through experience, and on the other, whether this learning has been incorporated into the professional conscience so as to be implemented in practice. It is interesting to observe how a single experience is felt in a diametrically opposite manner by one person to the next. Getting a negative grade brings some people down, while it acts as a stimulus for others. It makes some people give up, while others view it as a challenge.

Inevitably the years give us all experience, but they do not necessarily give us wisdom. They do not give us even a commitment towards action and solidarity for the less fortunate. For experience to be turned into wisdom (which etymologically comes from the Latin verbs of “know” and “like”) certain requirements must be met:

- a. A capacity to analyse events meticulously. Some people let events “go over their head”, without learning their meanings, without dissecting the invisible threads that are behind what transpires.
- b. A capacity to critically analyse events, understanding the meanings, the causes and the consequences. Some view the reality as non-historical, i.e. not dependent on human decisions, but rather things are how they are because they could not be any other way.
- c. Willingness to assimilate, in history, what is discovered. A positive attitude towards learning is a *sine qua non* factor to produce significant learning.

For the learning to be reflected in practice some complementary requirements are also necessary:

- a. Accepting a commitment to the professional practice that breaks away from embedded routines in the way the profession is understood and experienced. Many teachers act through inertia, in other words, the same way the teachers they had acted or the same way their colleagues around them act.
- b. That the context they are involved in enables original experiments to be put into practice, which move away from the hegemonic norm. If the system suffocates innovation, people shall act in a homogeneous way.

- c. Authorities who grant the freedom to undertake innovation and creativity. Naturally it is not the same thing to view professional practice under the motto of: “everything will stay the same, until it has to be changed” than under the motto of: “everything has to be changed, unless it is demonstrated that it should be maintained.”
- d. A climate has to exist that does not suffocate attempts to transform practice. In a background where routines prevail, it is common for a phagocyte effect to be produced for those who want to be innovative, given that these people bring into question the traditional mechanics and the lack of criticism about the assessment processes. Those who question, who seek to understand in greater depth what is done and the consequences, who try to introduce changes that require effort, automatically come against the resistance from those who do not want to do anything. Hence they are devoured. In destroying these people, the cause they defend is also destroyed.
- e. Conditions propitious for putting change into practice must be in place: time, number of pupils, laws that are coherent with an enriching education. At times, the contradictions between the legal stipulations and the practical demands are clamorous. For example, it is said that all the members of the educational project are equally important, but in some external assessments, organised by the same officials who pushed through the law, only the performance in mathematics and the mother tongue are assessed.

I am incredibly surprised with the ease with which the same mistakes are made by those who were victims of these very same errors. Children who suffer from the lack of understanding of parents do not make any effort to understand their children. Patients treated poorly by insensitive doctors, who subsequently became insensitive doctors themselves. Pupils who were assessed in an extremely harsh, authoritarian and irrational manner, and who later become teachers who practise an authoritarian irrational assessment. How is it possible that in such a short space of time they forget what they lived through?

I asked my pupils (around one hundred) to write about their assessment experiences. The exact question I asked was as follows: *what is the most*

*significant thing that happened to you when you were assessed in the education system?*

It is pointed out that the question does not focus on the negative aspects of the assessment. The question was not, for example: What problems did you have when you were assessed during your school learning? I say this because, as we will see, many of the answers have a clearly negative or problematic content. Perhaps, in reality, there were positive aspects, but the usual trend is to make an analysis in negative terms. In other words, we are more used to seeing black than white. Some time ago I had the chance to do the following experiment in a classroom: I drew a black dot in the centre of a completely white sheet of paper. When I showed it I asked: “what’s here?”, and I always received answers like: “a mark”, “a black spot”, “a hole”, “a blotch”... Why did they not see the white part of the paper, which was much bigger than the dot?

## COMMON CHARACTERISTICS IN THE REPORTS

There are common denominators in the descriptions of the pupils concerning the assessment process, i.e. aspects that are related by all of them, or almost all of them, in the reports they give.

### NEGATIVE DIMENSION

One of them is that most of the reports contain a negative, painful, bitter component. Why? Does assessment have more negative dimensions than positive ones? Are the mistakes and limitations enlarged? Does the way the experiences are felt lead to a selective memorisation of the negative phenomena? Is there a tendency, in the considerations about the vital experience, to emphasis the negative aspects of the reality?

Being open to criticism and being prepared to self-criticise is the way to understand and improve the assessment practices. The laziness of thought must not be confused with the firmness of convictions.

In the following extract we find a mixture of hierarchical abuses, negative labels attribution and threats of dubious taste.

“in the lessons the teacher kept us terrified. He asked, one by one, how a demonstration is done... Anybody who didn’t know was called a donkey, who should study more and he would often repeat, ‘you’ll all going to be given a zero grade...!’”

### PRESENCE OF FEELINGS

Many of the reports are impregnated with feelings. I’m going to dwell on this phenomenon, because very often the thinking is that assessment is a purely technical process, but that is not the case. Both the teachers and the pupils experience certain feelings when undergoing assessment (Santos Guerra, 2006). These feelings impact on their present and future actions. They also leave their mark on school lives and the lives in general of the assessors and the assessed.

In the words of one pupil, referring to the feelings evoked during an exam and finding out his grade, albeit by reading it on the notice board:

“Personally, I get terribly afraid when I have to go to see the grade written on the notice board, or for example, when the grade of a subject depends solely on a final exam, where my knowledge isn’t fairly assessed given that not everything that I assimilated and learned can be put onto a sheet of paper in a limited amount of time”

### HEGEMONY OF THE EXAM

There is an almost unanimous recognition of the exam as the main, almost only, tool of assessment. The written exam, which has been discussed in great depth (Álvarez, 2001).

“In my assessment experience I have to say that the exams stand out, and above all the written exams... I have never been assessed using a different method... there are several negative aspects involved in this kind of assessment:

- Firstly, you spend a few days studying, up to your limit, subjects that you sometimes don’t like or don’t understand.
- Secondly, you have to go through moments of great tension and nerves, before starting the exam. This should not happen, but it does, and it causes a huge amount of fear.
- Thirdly, when you finish, after a few minutes you forget almost everything.”

Even when tasks, exercises or other complementary forms of assessment are used, in reality the exam eclipses everything. All the rest is just accidental; the important thing, the only thing that is important, is the exam. As one pupil put it:

“If they make you do a stack of tasks, which you work really hard on, and then they give you an exam and you fail, the final grade is negative, without taking into account the tasks that you did.”

The moment of truth is, therefore, the exam. The rest of the work comprises playful tasks in terms of the final grade. These tasks are unconnected from the assessment of the learning. The previous pupil gives an example using a specific case:

“This experience happened to me in the 8<sup>th</sup> year of EGB<sup>1</sup>. On the day of the exam we had to hand in a dossier with newspaper cuttings and comments on them. If we didn’t hand in the cuttings we would be failed, but if we had a negative grade in the exam and we had handed in the dossier, we wouldn’t pass, even if it was just a question of a tiny percentage.”

#### HIERARCHISATION OF THE PROCESS

In the assessment process it is the teacher who “holds all the cards”. We found few examples of participation. The descendent nature of the assessment, the hierarchical component, has consequences that go beyond the fact of being assessed.

Essentially, what are being assessed are the pupils (Santos Guerra, 1993). As people rise in the hierarchy, they distance themselves from the threat of assessment. The teachers can be assessed and even the heads can be assessed (with less harsh repercussions than the pupils, when they are assessed), but the assessment does not go any higher in the hierarchy. From the top downwards assessment plays an increasingly important role, while from the bottom upwards the salaries increase like foam.

Also the way the assessment is carried out has consequences given that it is the teacher who decides and establishes the criteria, requirements, content and forms of assessment.

“My experience when being assessed led me to conclude that it is always the teacher who carries out the

assessment, not taking into account the opinion and possible suggestions of the pupils, even though they are at the centre of this assessment.”

One pupil states, in a cutting remark:

“I learned that they are always right... They feel superior to you, and when we fail, they do not understand that it is also partly their fault.”

#### HOMOGENISATION OF THE PROCESS

One way or another, almost all the pupils mention the homogenisation nature of the assessment (at all levels and subjects). Seldom is any mention made of the contextualisation or the diversity of the pupils.

The following pupil, in responding to what she considered most significant in the assessments made of her, said:

“Without doubt in all the assessments I had I felt the individual and the circumstances were not taken into account. In my case my possibilities and my expectations about what I did and what I learned. Yet, ‘in the wink of an eye’, sometimes even with a sleepy and uninterested expression, the teacher assessed what he called the ‘process’, but which was, at the end of the day and as always, an exam.”

Regarding this aspect, another pupil said that when carrying out assessment the diversity of the pupils is not taken into account and this is a contradiction to the reality, given that we are not all the same.

“We are assessed in equal conditions, without adaptations made for those who are not the same, i.e. the assessment is carried out as if we were equal, without taking into account the characteristics or the context of each person. The same level is established for everybody, even though it is known that we are not all the same and we do not all have the same conditions.”

#### THE MOST IMPORTANT MISTAKES

Many of the pupils spoke about feelings of rage concerning what they went through during the assessment process, and found little difference in their



view of the assessment carried out in the different education levels.

#### NEGATION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF ASSESSMENT

The pupils who speak about their experiences are future teachers and know the theoretical demands of the assessment, but see most of the suppositions required in an educational assessment ignored in practice (if the assessment is “educative” it is because it is centred on education, but also because it educates who carries it out and who receives it). In theory there is much talk of ongoing assessment, qualitative assessment, contextualised assessment, but...

“I have to say that, as a rule, the pupils are not usually assessed taking into account the work they produce every day. As such, pupils who never go to the lessons can get just as high grades as those who make an effort throughout the whole academic year.”

#### SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

The assessment incorporates important psychological phenomena. One which has the biggest repercussion on the pupils is the so-called *self-fulfilling prophecies*, carried out by teachers for the whole class, a proportion of the pupils or certain individuals.

As is known, the prophecy of an event usually causes the prophesised event to happen. Telling pupils that they “don’t have it in them” to study, that they are weak, that they will never get a pass, that they don’t have the ability to learn, that they are incapable of assimilating the knowledge, that however much they try they will never succeed, causes, as a result, the facts to confirm the statements. Therefore, it is important to avoid these negative prophecies and the reverse the content of them, stimulating the pupils so as to push them to achieve success.

“Carolina (fictitious name), you put in a lot of effort but this isn’t for you.”

#### AUTHORITARIAN DEMEANOUR

Furthermore, no experiences of pupil participation in the assessment process come to light. They simply take part by doing the exams when, how and where the teacher decides. The pupils do not participate in:

- establishing the criteria
- applying the criteria
- discussing the application of the criteria

Although many pupils showed their disagreement with the assessment and its results, few went to talk to the teacher to discuss and negotiate these results. Although this is important (Santos Guerra, 2003), it is believed that it is dangerous to talk about the grades because it is something that usually leads to harmful results.

#### INCONGRUENCE IN UNDERTAKING THE PROCESS

The incongruence can take on several forms (Santos Guerra, 2001). Between what the teacher says and what he does, between the principles that are written in the assessment textbooks and what happens in practice, between what one teacher does in relation to another, in the same academic year or even in the same school...

“Last year in a Pedagogy subject in which a lot emphasis was given to the importance of significant learning, as opposed to memorisation, when it came to the moment of assessment, I arrived for the exam having studied and understood all the content, and, of course, I answered all the questions of the exam in my own words. The answers were correct, but I had a negative grade in the exam. Later, when I retook, I studied the content again, but this time memorising it, repeating each word of the notes in parrot fashion. This time I passed.”

It does not appear congruent that a philosophy exam is failed because two words were missing accents.

“In obtained a grade of *sobresaliente*<sup>2</sup> in an exam, but the teacher failed me because I didn’t put the accent on ‘etimológicamente’ and ‘filosóficamente’<sup>3</sup>. I had to write out each word 50 times.”

#### ALARMING SIMPLIFICATIONS

A simplification aspect is revealed through the language, given that almost all of the reports identify the assessment process as a simple grading procedure. No consideration is usually taken as regards the assessment of experience, the assessment of the institution that is organising the exam, the assessment of the process...

Taking into account the huge complexity of assessment, the abusive simplification that usually accompanies its practice is very often drawn attention to. Complex issues are involved in:

- selection of content to be assessed
- form of proving the learning
- establishment of criteria
- application of criteria
- discussion of the application
- establishment of minimum pass grades
- causal attribution

“We had one teacher who said that the exams were scientific and that the grading could not be called into question. Which enables one to ascertain clearly who knew and who didn’t.”

Another pupil said:

“We had a teacher who said that he had to have 25% *fail*, 50% *pass* and 25% *notable* and *excellent* grades. The grades had to fit into this pattern.”

#### ABUSIVE COMPARISONS

It is common to find comparisons between students, between their grades, with harmful consequences for the party that comes off worse in the comparison.

“Both in the lessons of the *college* and the *institute*<sup>4</sup> we always have to suffer comparisons among our exam grades.”

“I remember in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of *EGB* the teacher split up the class as follows: the cleverest at the front and at the back the weakest. We had tests every Friday and in line with the grades we would be redistributed from the cleverest (front) to the weakest (back). I always felt bad because I was almost always in penultimate place.”

#### MISCELLANEOUS ARBITRARY DECISIONS

It is interesting to note that, however hard we try to be meticulous in carrying out an assessment (we have meticulous criteria, we apply these criteria objectively, we strictly stick to the application of these criteria when dealing with complaints), there are

pupils who are left with the sensation that the grade is a question of “luck”.

“After being assessed on numerous occasions I confirmed that, in the assessments, the grade we get in an exam depends to a large extent on luck, given that it depends on the teacher’s mood, how the exams of the other pupils went and many other aspects. These factors will affect what grade you get.”

One of the most common complaints from pupils is that the topics that are indicated for study are then largely unconnected to what comes out in the exam. Hence, there is a kind of trap that consists of demanding the study of a body of content, and then, to the consternation of the pupils, the assessor examines different topics to those that they had been told to study.

“There was one subject in which I felt especially bad, because I studied a lot for nothing, as the exam had nothing to do with the content.”

The pupils give extremely clear examples of arbitrariness. The criterion applied by the teacher is not only different to that of the pupil, but it is not even disclosed. In other words, a lot of assessment exams are carried out without informing the pupils of the criteria that will preside over their correction, and when returning the exam papers, the application of the criteria is seldom explained. And if there is a discrepancy between what the teacher thinks and what the pupil thinks, the teacher’s opinion always prevails.

“After having done an exam and getting a good grade, a *notable*, the teacher downgraded it to *pass*, because when he corrected the exercise book he found an exercise that hadn’t been corrected, out of all the ones that were in it (which were a lot).”

#### UNDERHAND DECISIONS

Some pupils believe that when they are assessed the teachers use underhand tricks. Asking for something then forgetting what they asked for, demanding the mastery of one area of knowledge then asking questions about a different topic, establishing certain requirements and then considering others which are different or even opposite.

“The teachers said they didn’t mind if we answered in our own words. So we didn’t have to repeat what was in the books — we could use our own words — but if you answered like this they then said the answers were not well structured.”

One of the most common and striking underhand tricks is related to the way the grades are attributed. This is a fact presented in the overall background of the system and in the specific practice of each lesson. The legislation reiterates that the pupils’ attitude, behaviour and values are very important, but in reality the only thing that mattered was the grade coming from the assessment of school performance in relation to certain areas of knowledge. The following pupil made this point clearly:

“We were always led to believe that our behaviour was an important factor in our grade, but at the moment of truth only the number that was written there was taken any notice of.”

#### PETTY VENGEANCE

There is no doubt that carrying out assessment affords teachers power over the pupils, and it is generally exercised in a variety of ways, given that the teachers decide on what form of assessment to implement (kinds of exams, dates, timetables, criteria, etc). Is the pupil granted the right to make a criticism, argue against something, express a contrary opinion to the teacher, without running the risk of suffering reprisals? When people are the target of reprisals they try to adopt a demeanour that takes into account the assumption of risks.

“The first time I failed an exam was in the first year at university. It was weird... I argued with the teacher in the classroom because he was acting like a parrot, reading his notes and I asked him to change his method. It was the only subject I failed and when I went to see the grade I had 4.9 [out of 10]. It was the only subject I had for September, but I studied and I passed it. I’m sure that I had passed in June.”

Another pupil commented that he got a fail because he did not go to the Christmas dinner organised by a teacher. A dinner which the teacher was apparently putting a lot of effort into.

One of the pupils said that he would not be appealing against a grade because he was afraid of reprisals, which, knowing the teacher, he was sure would be carried out.

“I won’t appeal because I’m afraid of the teacher, and also because of reprisals, as I have her in another subject.”

#### FAVOURITISM IN THE ATTRIBUTION OF GRADES

In general, the pupils are extremely sensitive when teachers act partially. In the pupils’ opinion favouritism is exercised for a variety of reasons: the presence of parents in the school, the social status of the parents, liking of certain pupils, being a “teacher’s pet”, etc.

“I think teachers allow themselves to be influenced by others. They do not treat the pupils whose parents get involved in a lot of college activities, or low-income parents, the same way as they treat others.”

“In general the assessment is more down to what you are like rather than the ability you have, including sucking up to the teachers.”

The objective tests that the teachers use, and which have such a misleading name (if they were really objective the results would not be so different depending on who compiled, applied or corrected them), leads the assessor to believe that the results are indisputable. It is based on the principle that it is the only way to know what has been learned and the only way to undergo correction. However, we know that the objective tests do not tell us anything about the argumentation, structuring, comprehension, creativity, assimilation and criticism skills of the individual being assessed.

“After doing the exam, which was an American kind (the pupils usually call the objective tests ‘American tests’), in which you had to get 30 items right out of 50 which made up the exam, the teacher failed the whole class, around 120 people, apart from 5 or 6 classmates who he liked.”



Another pupil says:

“In the assessment having a contact is crucial, especially in cases in which ‘the parents know the teacher, [the pupil] ‘is the doctor’s son’, etc.”

The same pupil added, emphasising the same point:

“Whoever sucked up to the teacher would certainly pass.”

The favouritism may have as a target a pupil or a broader group of pupils:

“When I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> year of EGB one of my teachers had his favourite group and the rest of us were treated with disdain.”

#### THE POWER OF LABELS

At school it is common to label students: “good pupil”, “bad pupil”, “brilliant pupil”, “unmotivated pupil”, “weak pupil”, etc. These labels are closely related to the self-fulfilling prophecies that we talked about earlier.

“I took extremely negatively the fact that a doubt was not clarified for me in an exam, because I was not one of the good pupils.”

#### GRATUITOUS ATTRIBUTION PROCESSES

Among others aspects, assessment has two very distinct facets. One of verification, which answers the question: Have you learned what we proposed to teach you? And another, of an attributive nature, which answers the following question: Why didn’t you learn it? (Santos Guerra, 1998). It is common for explanations concerning the failure of the pupils to be laid in one direction. The pupils’ fault: they are lazy, weak, poorly prepared, unmotivated, have bad influences, are not helped by their families, etc.

“What was hardest to take was to have to tolerate a teacher who attributed the highest percentage of failures to the fact that we were poor pupils and not the fact that he was a bad teacher or the poor educational practice.”

## THE MOST COMMON FEELINGS

Usually in institutional educational practice the emotional dimension is not taken into consideration. Be it the pupils, teachers, fathers or mothers’ state of mind. They are considered by the system, on the one hand, “teaching machines”, and on the other hand “learning machines” and machines do not suffer, do not feel joy, do not feel anguish...

“I’ve always viewed assessment as something terrible, as it caused me, and still causes me, a huge amount of nervousness, anxiety and stress.”

We will now see some examples of the most keenly felt feelings in the pupils’ experiences of being assessed. It would be interesting to know what, in this context, happens to the teachers.

#### INCONSISTENCY

Inconsistency is one of the most common feelings. Each teacher has his own criteria which, in his opinion are fair and logical. The problem is the pupils compare the criteria of one teacher against another’s and the experiences they have with each teacher. Comparing has the consequence of leading to inconsistency.

“When I got my grades for the various subjects I noticed that I had passed one in which I hadn’t understood the material at all and hadn’t learned anything, whereas I failed another one in which I had learned a lot.”

#### FEELING OF INJUSTICE

It is common to find deep-rooted feelings of injustice. The pupils think the assessment carried out using impersonal, homogenised, pressurised, strict, memorising methods leads to unjust situations.

“Like all my classmates I had unjust grades, in which I expected to have a good grade and I ended up failing.”

This causes a huge surprise. It seems that they are taking part in a lottery: their number almost never comes up, but when it does it brings enormous joy. The grades are not the result of an act of justice, but rather a question of good or bad luck.

“In September I didn’t do two subjects in order to prepare myself better for one of them and try and get a good grade. After leaving the exam hall very happy, a few days later I learned that I’d failed. And in February I was tired and bored, I didn’t feel like doing it, but I ended up studying for two days and a got a *notable*”.

#### PARALYSING FEAR

The fear which is mentioned in these reports is a feeling that arises more due to the teacher’s style than the assessment itself.

“I remember above all one negative aspect of assessment. The teacher would explain, make us do exercises on a daily basis, but from time to time he would ‘blow his top’, grab the pens (I still remember what they looked like) and we would start to tremble. He’d ask questions about what he’d explained over the last few days. What I mean is, even if you’d studied, given his expression and his shouting, you felt overcome with nerves.”

#### FEELINGS OF RIDICULE

The authority that a teacher has in the classroom makes the pupils, especially the younger ones, very emotionally charged when facing their assessors. This is the case of one pupil who relates, among others, the following experience with this final thought: “theses experiences left a lot of marks on me.”

“One day we did an exam and I failed, with a grade of 2, and he called me to his desk and embarrassed me in front of all the others. I was upset because I usually got good grades.”

One of the pupils said disparaging comments were made about her in public, and on top of that she was made to say thank you.

““You don’t understand this at all’, in front of a class of 30 pupils, on the platform, alone and... on top of all that having to say: ‘Thank you very much sir.’”

#### THE MOST IMPORTANT CONSEQUENCES

Generally, not much thought is given to the secondary effects that are related to the pupils’ actions in

the classroom and in schools. Certain targets are set and the assessment, in general, consists of checking that these have been achieved. It is not common to emphasise the effects that this action has.

And sometimes the secondary effects are stronger than intended. If we manage to enable pupils to learn some notions of physics, mathematics, literature or English, but they end up hating the learning process, the problem caused is much more serious than simply the lack of knowledge acquired. If they manage to learn some concepts of the curriculum subjects, but end up with an impaired capacity to think, form opinions, disagree, invent or make proposals, a deplorable service would have been rendered, even if the pupils had learned a lot.

We cannot forget the effects of the hidden curriculum, which acts constantly, in a veiled and multi-modal form on teachers and pupils. Although this is not what is intended to be taught, the pupils end up learning that the only important thing is to learn what is going to be assessed, that it is only important to study when questions are going to be asked, that to be successful one cannot disagree with the hegemonic thinking required in the assessments, etc.

What effect do the assessments have on the lessons? What are the consequences of the assessment methods implemented?

Some pupils mention the repercussions of the assessments they had to undergo.

#### DISAPPOINTMENT WHEN FACED WITH FAILURE

One of the repercussions is disappointment and subsequent loss of motivation and interest, even for subjects that the pupil liked initially.

“Something that left a big mark on me in the institute was the English exams, which I studied very hard for, put in maximum effort and yet I was never happy with the assessment. I lost my drive to continue to dedicate myself to the subject, despite liking English a lot.”

The negative attitude of teachers as regards helping the pupils overcome their learning difficulties had a demoralising effect. The lack of interest or sensibility, the explicit refusal to provide help, is a devastating aspect for the pupils.

“Once I asked the teacher for help in his subject and told me not to do it and to choose another one. But the problem was it was a compulsory subject.”

After an excellent past in one school, a pupil moved to another school to do the COU<sup>5</sup> and it was a complete disaster. She failed almost all the subjects.

“They destroyed me. From that year onwards I wasn’t only afraid, I was a nervous wreck regarding exams. I made the decision to change institute. I did the COU again and I got *sobresalientes* again”.

#### FORGETTING WHAT WAS LEARNED

One of the consequences described in the texts written by the pupils is that they forget everything they have studied for an exam, especially if they learned by memorising. It is interesting to note, in the following report, that the pupil only speaks about learning when the knowledge is interiorised by the person who learns. He deems that material that is immediately forgotten is not truly learned.

“The most important thing, in my opinion, was that most of the time (practically always), I didn’t learn anything that I had studied for the assessment. In other words, what I had studied (memorised) for the assessments was forgotten.”

#### SCHOOL DROP-OUT

One of the most serious consequences of the non-personalised assessment methods, or to put it another way, overly demanding exams, is school drop-out. Some people end up assimilating the negative opinions of the assessor and feel downcast. When somebody says: “You’re good for nothing”, we have to go through tremendous difficulties to achieve success. But when we take this on board and say to ourselves: “I’m good for nothing”, then there is no solution possible. There is no greater oppression than the oppressed who get the oppressor’s ideas into their heads.

“Due to the unjust labels I had been given, I felt a clear perception of injustice, which demoralised me and led me to stop studying. On top of that, they even made a fool out of me in front of all my classmates.”

#### STRESS AND DISQUIET

When you “put all your eggs in one basket”, when everything depends on an exam, it is completely natural that we will experience a state of anxiety that will have the opposite effect as regards what is necessary to take an exam in good condition.

“I went through negative aspects of assessment, such as stress, disquiet, anxiety, rivalry and the irrational desire to stand out.”

#### DESTRUCTION OF THE [POSITIVE] SELF-CONCEPT

After being repeatedly attributed labels by those who hold power, the pupils start to believe the idea that they do not have ability, that they are not worth anything, that studying is not for them, that they are not capable. The institution and the professionals who stimulate the construction of a positive self-concept and help in the growth of their pupils use their strength to crush and demoralise.

“They made me feel stupid, a bad pupil, without any hope of succeeding as a student, because everything I presented (reflections, essays, opinion texts, etc) was wrong. In other words, I didn’t get anything right and of course I got negative grades in the exams as for somebody of my level you couldn’t expect anything else.”

#### HIRING TUTORS

The hiring of tutors by families is another consequence of the assessment, almost always because of failures in the assessment. Sometimes the family decides to hire a tutor, but on other occasions it is the teachers themselves who advise the family to hire a tutor as a solution to their child’s learning problems. To constantly have a tutor is a form of labelling.

“I spent the whole summer studying like mad, with a tutor. I left the exam hall happy, but I failed.”

#### CLOSING THE DOOR

At the start I presented some conditions required to enable one to learn from one’s own experience. After having written these pages I would like to ask the reader another question. If your answer is negative

this article will be useless. Can you learn from what is in somebody else's head? My answer is yes, but depending on certain requirements:

- Ask questions about the practice, so that we can seek and find solutions for improvement
- Carry out the practice with humility, self-criticise and take the experiences of others on board as a critical enquiry that can help us
- Keep a warm-hearted attitude in relation to the practice and people
- Adopt an optimistic attitude as regards the possibility of improving your professional assessment activity.

We can read what is felt on the skin, because it expresses ideas in a stronger and clearer manner than when written on paper. Only those who want to learn will learn. The verb 'learn', like the verb 'love', cannot be conjugated in the imperative. What others have written on their skin can also serve as a lesson to others, provided that they have the necessary ability to empathise and the firm desire to constantly improve themselves.

## ENDNOTES

1. Translator's note. The subject is *Educación General Básica*. The Organic Education Law (LOE, passed in May 2006) established that compulsory basic education would include ten years of schooling, from the age of 6 to 16 years. The basic education is organised into primary education and compulsory secondary education. For more information about the structure of the current Spanish education system see the respective ministerial webpage: <http://www.educacion.es/educacion/sistema-educativo/principios-fines.html>.

2. Translator's note. Generally in the Spanish system the grades are as follows: *suspenso* (suspended), *aprobado* (pass), *notable* (notable), *sobresaliente* (excellent) and *matrícula de honor* (pass with distinction).

3. Translator's note. In Spanish the adverbs that end in "mente" have an accent when the words they result from have accents.

4. Translator's note. In Spain it is common to call the educational centres that supply basic and secondary education *Colleges*, while an *Institute* teaches only the secondary education level.

5. Translator's Note. *Curso de Orientación Universitaria* (preparatory academic year for access to higher education). To see an update on the Spanish education system, visit the webpage cited in footnote 1.

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