SEJ
SPOŁECZEŃSTWO
EDUKACJA
JĘZYK

Tom 18/2023, ss. 31-40
ISSN 2353-1266
e-ISSN 2449-7983
DOI: 10.19251/sej/2023.18(3)
www.sej.mazowiecka.edu.pl
Otrzymano: 18.05.2023
Zaakceptowano: 19.06.2023
Opublikowano: 28.12.2023

CC BY

Lidia Marszałek
The Mazovian Academy in Płock
Orcid 0000-0002-8425-9591

DO NOT JUDGE A FISH BY ITS TREE CLIMBING ABILITIES – SOME REFLECTIONS ON TEACHERS' OPINIONS ABOUT THEIR STUDENTS

NIE OSĄDZAJ RYBY WEDŁUG JEJ UMIEJĘTNOŚCI WSPINANIA SIĘ NA DRZEWO – KILKA REFLEKSJI NA TEMAT OPINII NAUCZYCIELI O ICH UCZNIACH

Summary:

The presented text highlights many aspects of teacher assessment of students in today's school. The author deals with the issues of school grades, which show the degree of mastery of the teaching material in the field of taught subjects. It also indicates other contexts of students' functioning, which should find their place in building teachers' opinions about their pupils.

Keywords: school, teacher, student, assessment, opinions

Streszczenie

Prezentowany tekst wskazuje wiele aspektów oceniania uczniów przeznauczycieli we współczesnej szkole. Autorka podejmuje w nim problematykę szkolnych ocen, odzwierciedlających stopień opanowania materiału nauczania w zakresie nauczanych przedmiotów. Wskazuje też inne konteksty funkcjonowania uczniów, które powinny znaleźć swoje miejsce w budowaniu opinii nauczycieli na temat swoich wychowanków.

Słowa kluczowe: szkoła, nauczyciel, uczeń, ocenianie, opinie

1. Introduction

Judging another person - especially a young person by an adult - is an easy, sometimes unreflective task.Judgements are sometimes made on the basis of the selective characteristics of the judged and the requirements of the judger. Such - as human beings - is our nature that we tend to judge others 'according to ourselves', performing, in a sense, a 'transfer' to the Other of our own qualities that we judge negatively, suspecting him of the same qualities and intentions. Often, however, this assessment is unfair and hurtful. Sometimes we demand too much, sometimes we do not see the positive qualities of another person because it is easier for us, because we do not have to penetrate into the nature of the other person, we accept him or her superficially on the basis of criteria known only to ourselves.This happens very often in our private or professional lives and it is then necessary to accept this course of action, although one may try to fight against an unfair opinion through his/her commitment and behaviour.For an adult, this is not a particularly difficult task, although quite many give up in the face of pressure from superiors or friends and withdraw from their social or professional ambitions and plans.

This issue is completely different in the case of teachers (the tutors), whose task it is to discover what is best in their pupils (the tutees).Here, opinions about young people given to them on the threshold of their own lives are of particular importance, as they can both "give them wings" but also effectively clip them, destroying a young person's plan for their own life, his dreams and expectations.Appreciating what is good in a pupil and nurturing it promotes his/her development towards full humanity and the realisation of his/her own idea of life. Drawing attention only to shortcomings and deficiencies discourages pupils, causes them to think in terms of "I'm not good for anything" and consequently to give up their own plans, dreams and aspirations.

These good qualities are not necessarily school successes, expressed in terms of grades in particular subjects. Not necessarily the grades obtained in subsequent tests and examinations.Young people have many other valuable qualities and skills that should be strongly appreciated by form teachers.Young people are capable of displaying many positive qualities and skills which, if appreciated by the educator, can become their basis for building their own happy concept of life.

2. 'Hard criteria': school grading

School grades tend to be expressed in different ways - numbers, letters, percentages. In each case, they are meant to be a reflection of the level a pupil has reached in mastering the curriculum material.The teacher checks the small exams, classworks, essays, tests and gives a grade. In the end, it is "pass-fail". And if passed, what grade? Satisfactory? Good? Very good?Assessment only serves to indicate the extent to which the student has mastered the learning material.Material that is sometimes completely unnecessary at a given stage of education, but the programme requires the student to master it,

regardless of whether it will ever be useful to him or her in later life and at subsequent educational levels. If it is useful, it only serves to pass the next test.

As a result of the assessment received, the pupil knows what he does not know, what he is weak in. He doesn't know how to improve his skills. He only gets the 'hard' information: in these areas you are worthless.He does not learn what he knows, in which aspects he is good or even very good. No one applauds him, no one emphasises his positive sides and the excellent results of mastering part or all of the material.He receives a message about a number (or a percentage of mastery of the curriculum material) that somehow determines his level of knowledge of the curriculum content. If it is a high grade, he is satisfied.If low - he has no idea what he has to do to improve his results. As a consequence, these 'results' are no longer important to him, he just wants to move on to the next class. He struggles to survive in the school reality.

A good technique to remedy this is for the teacher to use the 'green pencil' technique rather than the red pen. The red pen highlights mistakes, points out deficiencies."Speckled" with red notes and deletions, a test or an essay demotivates the student as it only points out his mistakes.A student seeing such a card often breaks down convinced that the teacher only sees the bad parts of his work. The green pencil indicates what the pupil can do very well, and mobilises him/her to work in those areas where there are no these green ticks or pluses. This technique says: you are good in many areas, improve where the green plus is missing. The student knows what he/she is doing well with, that he/she is good and needs to work a little more on other aspects where that green plus is missing.But they also know that the teacher notices their good points in the first place, is on their side, sees their progress (Krasnowska: 2021).

The issue of 'formative assessment' is also important. According to this concept, the student should receive feedback from the teacher on his/her work, on the level of learning, what he/she is doing well and what he/she needs to improve. The student should also receive initial information from the teacher about what is being learned, why and what is the purpose of the lesson. He/she should also be able to report the degree of understanding of the topic given and the possible need for further clarification, to which the teacher should respond according to the expectations of the students."Formative assessment, in turn, is intended to help students learn, so this name can safely be changed to formative teaching. In this process, the student becomes a full participant, recognising in the teacher his/her guide and master. They learn for themselves and take responsibility for what they do. They are always informed where they are in the acquisition of knowledge and skills, what they need to improve, change and what direction they need to take.All the teacher's comments, advice and reflections are given to the student 'at a glance', as one of the elements of formative teaching is feedback that guides the student through the meanderings of learning at school" (Choroszczyńska: 2006, 322-323).

Unfortunately, many teachers do not follow the principles of this teaching system to the detriment of their students and their educational achievements.Few of them inform the student about his/her progress and necessary improvements in certain

aspects of teaching-learning, usually giving an objective evaluation of the achievements made so far and expecting the student to improve this evaluation, without providing feedback - what the student still needs to work on, which aspects of the subject to focus on, where to look for the necessary knowledge; what he/she excels at and what he/she still needs to work on to get better grades. On the basis of the grades the teacher gives, he also forms an opinion about the pupil, often using this initial judgement in further assessing the student.

3. How to assess a fish?

Our children are not just about school grades and their educational progress. Yes, school is very important, but not the most important thing in life. Especially in this lifetime in which a young person will later come to live.Not his/her school grades, but many other qualities and skills will then be important for them to be able to find their way in the world.

In her teaching career, the author has repeatedly encountered pupils and students who "did not promise well", received poor grades and had learning difficulties. However, later in life, they turned out to be doing brilliantly, benefiting from other qualities they had developed in their childhood and youth. Unfortunately, teachers often judge students based on their grades in particular subjects - this one is weak, that one won't make anything out of it, this one will end up laying cobblestones... By the way, it can be joked that laying cobblestones sometimes brings a much higher salary and therefore a higher standard of living than even an assistantship or a position of an assistant professor or professor at a university.Unfortunately, it is often the case that teachers' opinions of pupils are formed on the basis of "first impressions" - a pupil who initially receives good grades does not have to make much effort to get new ones, does not have to put much effort into learning, because for the whole period of education at a given school he/she benefits from, colloquially speaking, "having a good name".He/she is perceived as talented and clever, while his/her potential mistakes and lapses are treated as a temporary indisposition which does not lower the teacher's evaluation. And vice versa - a pupil who initially does not cope with the material taught and receives poor grades is already "condemned" in advance to the opinion of a weak, low-ability pupil. Even if, after some time, the student puts more effort into learning, devotes a lot of his/her own time and effort to it in order to catch up with the requirements of the programme, he/she is still perceived through the prism of a first opinion of a weak student who has "got lucky" on successive tests and is even suspected of using cheat sheets or other unfair means to achieve better grades.Mistakes and difficulties are clearly highlighted, achievements are treated as incidental, without changing the opinion of the pupil as weak and 'not promising'.Teachers are reluctant to change their opinions about students - opinions they have already developed in their first encounters with them, as this would force the teachers to reflect that they were wrong in their assessment of the student. Admitting

a mistake in an opinion is an act of great courage; unfortunately, few teachers can afford this reflection and change their approach to a tutee.And so the vicious circle continues, in which teachers judge students by their performance that takes the form of grades, often unfairly and harmfully.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that: "In the postulates of humanistic psychology and the resulting approach to the expression of assessment, there is a shift away from a quantitative understanding of phenomena to considering them in a qualitative, holistic way in an individual dimension.A child cannot be divided like this: the mind going to school, the rest of the body and the soul, leaving only the mind to be assessed. The child is an inseparable whole that is not subject to division, and therefore assessment procedures based on a quantitative approach - measuring only what can be measured and not taking into account other aspects, values and developmental benefits that can be derived from a different course of assessment - are now being criticised" (Kopaczyńska: 2004, 42).

In assessing a pupil-tutee as a human being, it is their personal qualities that are more important than their school grades. Do we recognise in our pupils the qualities of a "social worker", of a person who is involved in the affairs of the school? Can we appreciate these qualities, recognise them as important not only for the school, but also for the local environment?Do we see in them - the pupils - the potential for social and charitable activities in which they engage without our (the teachers') interference? The author once had the opportunity to work with a secondary school in Poland as a coordinator of university cooperation and methodological advisor.One year, a few pupils 'banded together', organised on their own the delivery of a large spruce tree to the school and had it decorated for Christmas. They made sure the school was in the right festive mood.Did they receive any recognition, plaudits from the school management or educators because of this? No. It was considered that activity in the interest of the school was a normal duty of the students and did not deserve any recognition, even in the form of verbal praise in the presence of other students or a little-costly written diploma.The following year, these students did not even take any action in this field. Their commitment was disregarded. Further action was discouraged.The ingenuity and willingness to act for the benefit of the school, and the atmosphere within, has been killed. Shouldn't it be the form teachers and the school management who appreciate the students' initiative and give it at least symbolic recognition?

Do we appreciate in our pupils their sense of humour, their joy of young life? Or do we treat it as an insubordination to the "serious" problems that are part of the curriculum? Do we know how to respond to their jokes and their ridicule of the nonsensical curricular content given to them?Do we as teachers know how to use these jokes in the teaching process? After all, every joke can be turned into a meaningful problem related to the content to be taught, in order to transform it from a joke into a profound question to which our students shall passionately seek scientific answers.We can use joy to explore, to feel, to understand. To learn about the world. Every teacher should have this

skill, as it serves to intensify the learning process by arousing students' interest in the topic of the lesson.

As teachers, do we see sensitivity in our students? Kindness, a readiness to respond to the needs of others, a willingness to help, a dedication to friends? Do we notice those small moments when students lend each other teaching aids, share textbooks, pens, crayons that another student forgot to take from home?Here, of course, comes the problem of 'prompting' in oral answers or 'cribbing' homework. This is highly unhelpful from a didactic point of view and the author obviously does not endorse this practice, but does it not show that our pupils want to help each other, having a deep affection and friendship for one another? The teacher should rebuke this kind of behaviour among students, but must recognise that these attempts to help another student are driven by kindness and sensitivity to the problems of others, and respect these feelings of pupils.This is where proper attention plays a huge role: "I know you want to help your friend, but that's not the way to do it, everyone has to work independently for their own achievements". Writing remarks in the diary and drawing negative consequences against the 'prompter' and the 'prompted' will bring nothing but more antipathy towards the teacher and the subject.The teacher should exercise restraint and tact in addressing students in such a situation - only then will he/she maintain respect among students and can mobilise those 'weaker' students to work harder on their educational achievements.

The teacher should also - besides paying attention only to the pupils' grades - appreciate their diligence. Not every student is gifted; some have difficulties in mastering the material to be taught. Some master the material easily, others have to work many hours to master the same material. The teacher should know the student's capabilities and, above all, appreciate his/her efforts in mastering knowledge - grades should, above all, reflect the pupil's efforts and not only the results measured by tests. The teacher should not praise only the achievements of gifted students who effortlessly achieve good and very good grades.It is also important to acknowledge the efforts of the less talented, the weaker ones, if only in the form of verbal praise: "I can see that you are trying very hard, I respect your effort very much, you are getting better and better achievements, keep it up!". Every weaker pupil, upon receiving such a message from the teacher, will feel mobilised to make further efforts to improve their skills and knowledge. Each will feel uplifted that his/her hard work is appreciated and noticed, and thus will work with even greater willingness and commitment.The author herself can recall a similar example from her work as a university teacher: one of my students - whom I considered gifted, while other lecturers did not necessarily - at one point received a failing grade on an exam in a rather difficult subject from the second-year programme. He was already ready to give up his studies because of this. I asked him for a personal interview and asked: "Why did you let me down like that? I have always believed in you, you are talented and smart, you can and are able to do even better than others. Why did you fail this subject? Get to work and you have to pass it for me as soon as possible!". After two weeks, the student approached me and informed that he had passed the subject with a fairly good grade,

higher than most of the students in this group. And he thanked me for mobilising him, for believing in him and trusting in his abilities. He graduated with distinction.Just this one example shows how powerful the right message from the teacher can be, how much it can mobilise a student to work, to increase effort, not only "for now", but also for the years to come. How powerful it is to believe in a pupil's capabilities and to communicate this message to him or her - it doesn't matter what form it takes, only that it increases their willingness to work and their ambition.

Do we notice, as teachers, the behaviour of our pupils-tutees towards other people? Are we able to appreciate their respect, shown not only to adults but also to their peers?Do we appreciate every "good morning" said not only in the school corridor, but even during a casual encounter on the street? Do we see how our pupils address each other?Respect for the Other is the basis of our humanity, it defines our attitude towards the social world. It is the foundation of moral values, the basis of empathy and understanding of others. It is linked to concern for the feelings and well-being of others."Every human being wants to be treated with respect by others. We all unerringly sense whether someone has treated us with respect or not. Our feelings tell us this.In the presence of people who show us respect, we feel good, we start to believe in our own strengths and abilities, our self-esteem is strengthened, we feel free to express our needs and opinions. Disrespect - neglect, irony, criticism, humiliation - makes us anxious, sad, angry.Sometimes, even years later, we remember the resentment that contact with a person has left in us" (Koźmińska, Olszewska: 2018). We as teachers, as adults, expect respect from our pupils. And we have the right to do so. However, our students have the same right: they have the right to receive respect from us, if only for the sake of the dignity of every human being - be it a child or an adult.We therefore have no right to expect respect from our pupils if we do not show it by ourselves. However, even in such a situation, signs of respect (politeness, proper addressing to adults - not only teachers, but also other school staff - to peers, etc.) on the part of the pupils should be extremely important in making our (teachers') opinion of the pupils.

Are our pupils creative, imaginative, original? Are we as teachers able to respect and appreciate these qualities in our students?The author is well aware of the fact that such students are often disliked by teachers - they are 'problematic' because they ask a lot of questions, discuss (in a positive sense), look for their own solutions to school problems, instead of obediently following what the teacher says and expects of them. More often than not, he/she expects an attitude of 'sit, listen, take notes, solve tasks the way I show you, take everything I say as axioms and don't say much until you are asked'. Nevertheless, young people want to ask questions, they want to know more, they want explanations, they want to discover the world "in their own way", to express themselves in different projects and tasks. They want to be independent and can be uncompromising. They are looking for their own path in life.On the part of the teachers, however, they are told "stop! This is not allowed to you. Learn and reproduce the knowledge I give you". This approach actually hinders their individual development, their self-discovery

of their possibilities and potentials.It is worth mentioning here that some very talented pupils, those who sometimes revealed their genius in certain areas in adulthood, failed at school precisely because of the school's clichéd approach.One example is Albert Einstein, who experienced huge problems in his admission to Zurich University of Technology - he was only admitted conditionally, as he received very poor grades in humanities subjects during his entrance exams (CiekawostkiHistoryczne.pl).Another example is Bill Gates, who, during his studies, was forbidden to use his hardware when working on new software, and was therefore forced to offer Computer Center Corporation a bug search for their software in exchange for access to their hardware.In the end, he did not graduate, but his brilliant career in the field of computer science is known to almost everyone in the world (Życiorysy.pl). We, the teachers of young people, can never predict who will «grow up» over time from this student, whom we often «write off» due to his/her poor educational achievements at school level. Perhaps it is this questioning, debating pupil, demanding attention for his/her originality and creativity, who in the future will turn out to be an outstandingly capable scientist, discovering new worlds or creating innovative technologies.Or perhaps in the mind of this quiet, rarely speaking student, brilliant ideas are just being born on how to make the world a better place, how to improve companies, local environments, how to help those who need help, how to improve the functioning of education or the labour market.

Of course, this is where a dilemma arises that concerns many reflective teachers. It refers to the question of passing the successive school exams that give access to further stages of education. For many years, Polish schools have been using tests, built to a 'key', defined by bureaucrats who were once teachers.They have their own visions of the correct, the only right answers. Not conforming to these 'keys' means either very poor results in exams or even failing them, which hinders their further educational development.What counts nowadays are averages, percentages, and the correspondence of the student's answers to the test authors' intention. One example is the command "In 180-200 words, describe the given problem". The student does not so much focus on the problem as on counting the words used. Meanwhile, some problems can be explained in three sentences, others require several pages to fully cover the topic. However, the student must focus on not writing too little or too much, as the task will then be graded lower. In addition, according to the accepted "key" of the correct answer. There is no room for originality, creativity, expressing one's views, constructive criticism. There is no room for "being yourself" and expressing your opinions.And this is where the teacher's dilemma arises - should they simply teach students to answer according to the 'key' and thereby hinder their personal development, thus being detrimental to them; or should they allow their originality and creativity to develop by straying from the 'key' and also thereby being detrimental to them, because then their exam results will be very poor or they will not pass at all? And this dilemma is still unresolved. And it will remain so until exams take a different form - they will not be assessed according to a 'key', but according to the student's ability to think, infer, be creative and original.Teachers therefore often

choose the 'learn and pass' option, consciously aiming for the best possible results for their pupils in examinations and for enabling them to access the best possible route to further education - and it is hard to blame them for this. In doing so, they want the best for their students.

The author herself experienced this dilemma as both a teacher and a mother. When her own son was taking his matriculation exams a dozen years ago, she said: 'Please, for these three hours, stop thinking. Don't think. Just do the tasks as you were taught'. She was met with protest: 'But what do you mean; you've taught me all my life above all to think!' The author explained calmly: 'Yes, that's right, but now for those three hours, stop thinking. Then you will pass the exams. Later you will think'. The son accepted the instructions and passed his matriculation exams with a score of 100%. Thanks to the fact that he switched off his thinking and just followed instructions as he was taught at school. But is this what we want? Should we be telling our students - don't think, don't be creative, just pass this exam?Is this really how we want to bring up young people - unthinking, obedient, "fitting in" to the ossified way of adults' thinking? Shouldn't the young generation bring with them a freshness of thought, a constructive criticism of fixed systems and knowledge, shouldn't they look for new solutions and improve the world in which they happen to live?Does this generation have to reproduce the knowledge of people who are almost at the end of their lives because those people have decided to do so? Young people are a social potential who may and is able to change the world for the better, through their originality, creativity, hope, striving to realise their own humanity and achieve their life goals.

Do we as teachers recognise our students' passions and talents? Do we appreciate them? These might or might not be related to elements of the school learning. Maybe our pupil is passionate about theatre? Maybe he/she has a fascination for building interesting LEGO structures?Maybe he is interested in astronomy and can name all the components of our solar system with their characteristics, point out interesting phenomena in space? Maybe he/she is engaged in studying meteorology and can tell you all about the types of clouds, atmospheric fronts, isobars and isotherms?Or are any of them masters in the art of origami? Do we teachers know this? Are we able to appreciate the in-depth skills and knowledge of our students, even beyond the school curriculum? It is worth recognising our students' passions and making lesson time available to showcase them.It is worth inviting a theatre lover to lead a discussion on a particular play included in the school's canon of readings, a LEGO lover to lead part of a technology lesson, an astronomy enthusiast to present his knowledge in a physics lesson, a meteorology fanatic to discuss his knowledge in a geography lesson, an origami master to teach the basics of this difficult art in an art lesson.On the one hand, this can be something absorbing for the other pupils and stimulate their interests; on the other hand, it will raise the pupils' self-esteem to be able to pass on at least some of their knowledge and passion to their peers.The added value of lessons taught in this way will be a sense of respect for the teacher who is

able to give a voice to his/her students so that they can put forward their passions, their knowledge and their interests, while still following the imposed curriculum.

4. Summary

The text above is full of questions. However, these are questions that every form teacher should ask themselves. And to answer them themselves after self-reflection on their behaviour towards pupils and on the construction of their own opinions about them.School grades in each subject should not be the basis for a final opinion about a student, as there are many other aspects that may ultimately contribute to a completely different assessment of the student - above all as a young person, still developing and building his/her own humanity and searching for his/her path in life and place in the observed world.The form teacher should in the first place look for the good in his/her pupils, for positive qualities, independent of their school grades, and build his/her opinions about them on this basis. And not only build these opinions, but also communicate them to the pupils, so that they feel valued as people and not just students with certain school grades.

References

Choroszczyńska, Marta. 2008. *Uczeń pod lupą oceniania kształtującego, czyli o współpracy ucznia z nauczycielem.* Warsaw: The National In-Service Teacher Training Centre, http://www.ptde.org/pluginfile.php/12/mod_page/content/5/Archiwum/XII/Ucze_pod_lup_oceniania_kszta_tuj_cego.pdf

Kopaczyńska, Iwona. 2004. *Ocenianie szkolne wspierające rozwój ucznia*, Cracow: Impuls.

Koźmińska, Irena i Elżbieta Olszewska. 2020. *Wykład szacunek*.

https://calapolskaczytadzieciom.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/MC_Wyklad_Szacunek.pdf

Krasnowska, Kinga. *Metoda zielonego ołówka,* https://www.mamazone.pl/przedszkolak/metoda-zielonego-olowka/

Ciekawostki Historyczne.pl, https://ciekawostkihistoryczne.pl/leksykon/albert-einstein-1879-1955/

Życiorysy.pl, https://zyciorysy.pl/biografia/bill-gates/