

CONTROLLER OR LEARNING PARTNER? THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN A "GRADE-FREE" SCHOOL

CONTROLORE O PARTNER DI APPRENDIMENTO? IL RUOLO DELL'INSEGNANTE IN UNA SCUOLA "SENZA VOTI"



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ABSTRACT

Considering assessment, teaching and learning as interconnected processes, teachers must be seen as key actors in school change in order to achieve positive results. This research began in a middle school that decided, starting in the 2023/24 S.Y., to replace grades with narrative feedback. Analysis of focus groups conducted with teachers revealed a change in conceptualisation and statements about practices only among teachers who had been involved in designing the experiment from the outset.

Valutazione, insegnamento e apprendimento sono processi interconnessi e gli insegnanti sono attori chiave per il successo nell'innovazione scolastica. La ricerca si è svolta in una scuola secondaria di primo grado che ha deciso, a partire dall'A.S. 2023/24, di sostituire i voti con feedback narrativi. L'analisi dei focus group condotti con gli insegnanti ha rivelato un cambiamento nelle percezioni e dichiarazioni di pratiche solamente tra coloro coinvolti nella sperimentazione fin da subito.

KEYWORDS

Assessment for learning, narrative feedback, assessment practices, assessment innovation, focus group

Valutazione per l'apprendimento, feedback narrativo, pratiche di valutazione, innovazione nella valutazione, focus group

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, the social and cultural context is constantly and rapidly changing, and schools must be able to continue to innovate in order to keep up with the times (Vähäsantanen, 2015). Over the years, the school system has seen its function and mission change in relation to changing social dynamics (Nardi, Rossi & Toci, 2020).

Within school innovation, teachers cannot play a marginal role in operational decisions; they must be considered actors “whose thoughts and actions are considered in reflections on possible educational innovations” (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p.2). As Carletti (2025) states, in order for schools to keep pace with social innovation, it is essential that the idea of the teacher be transformed into a multidisciplinary concept that is capable of adapting to change and serving as a point of reference for the growth of future generations.

This framework includes innovation in assessment practices, which represents one of the main opportunities for bringing about change in the way teaching and learning processes are considered and therefore implemented, and more generally in the way the function of schools is thought about (Hargreaves et al., 2002).

In order to frame what is meant by innovation in assessment practices, it is necessary to reflect on the role of pupils and teachers in assessment processes.

Summative assessment is assessment approaches in which the only actor is the teacher, who must first ascertain or monitor student learning against an assessment scale used to compare expected and actual results (Benvenuto, 2021; Notti, 1995; Grion & Maniero, 2019; Taras, 2005). Formative assessment goes beyond this ‘certification’ approach to offer an assessment method that focuses on the process and continuous improvement thanks to the feedback that teachers provide to students. (Stiggins, 2002; Black & William, 2009; Threlfall, 2005; Shute, 2008).

Assessment for learning and assessment for sustainability, on the other hand, are structured as assessment approaches designed and implemented with the direct involvement of students, who receive and formulate feedback aimed at supporting learning processes (Weeden, Winter, & Broadfoot, 2021; Grion, Restiglian, & Aquario, 2021; Grion, Restiglian & Slaviero, 2025; Dochy et al. 1999).

International research has identified various types of feedback used in the school context to communicate assessment (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). Among the various

methods identified, grades are the most widely used practice, despite having numerous limitations, such as not providing adequate information to support improvement and having negative effects on students' self-esteem and motivation (Khon, 2011). In contrast, narrative feedback has been recognised as a useful tool for supporting learning, especially when students are involved in its production (Grion, Serbati, Doria & Nicol, 2021; Lipnevich & Panadero, 2021).

Narrative feedback is theorised as information provided by an agent about the gap between the actual level and the reference level. It is part of the assessment process and is useful for improving learning (Ramaprasad, 1983; Sadler 1989; Hattie and Timperley 2007; Serbati, Grion & Fanti, 2019).

This theoretical framework provides the context for the present research, which aims to explore whether there are changes in the perceptions and statements of teachers working in innovative contexts who have chosen to abandon the use of ongoing assessment and replace it with narrative feedback.

2. Methods

2.1 Research objectives

In line with what was presented in the theoretical framework, this research aims to investigate, through a qualitative design, whether and how reflection on assessment, induced by training and experimentation on assessment, leads teachers to change their perceptions and statements of practice, not only in relation to learning assessment but also, more generally, to teaching and learning.

Through the conduct of two focus groups with the teachers involved in the experimentation, this research aims to verify and analyze whether and to what extent training and experimentation on learning assessment influence changes in perceptions and statements related to practice.

In this light, it is possible to identify the following research questions:

Q1. What are the conditions for teachers involved in training and experimentation to change their perceptions and statements of practice in relation to assessment?

Q2. Which specific assessment practices undergo changes according to teachers' perceptions?

2.2 Context

This contribution is part of a broader doctoral project that aims to explore and analyse the assessment approaches and practices used in secondary schools in Italy. Among the various research areas comprising the project is a multiple case study that explores the experiences of secondary schools currently conducting assessment experiments at the national level. The school analysed in this paper is one of the schools included in the multiple case study.

The research was carried out in a comprehensive school in the province of Padua, which is structured into three lower secondary school complexes with a total of 373 pupils, divided into 18 classes:

- The main school (*MS*) consists of nine classes.
- Two smaller and peripheral schools (*PS*):
 - the first has six classes,
 - the second has three classes.

Over the last five years, teachers have taken various training courses to investigate and innovate teaching and assessment practices at their school. In all classes of the three secondary school complexes, starting from the 2023/24 school year, an experiment was launched in relation to “in itinere” assessment, without the use of grades, replaced by narrative feedback. In this way, the school has decided to adopt the use of narrative feedback in ongoing assessment, replacing numerical grades, which will be used exclusively in the interim and final assessment reports, in accordance with current legislation. With this experimentation, the school intended to move from teacher-managed assessment (summative and formative assessment) to a more active involvement of pupils in assessment processes, i.e. in assessment practices for learning (Grion, Serbati, Cecchinato, 2022).

To carry out this experiment, all teachers were involved in various training courses on assessment with different experts in the field, as well as colleagues from other schools who had already started the same experiment in their own classrooms. The training courses were aimed at stimulating critical reflection on the assessment practices commonly used in the classroom and encouraging a shared discussion on the objectives and meanings attributed to assessment in the school context. In addition, they were aimed at getting teachers to improve their practices of more pupil-participated assessment.

In addition, the MS school, consisting of nine classes, simultaneously launched an educational experiment called “DADA” (Didattica per Ambienti Di Apprendimento, or Teaching for Learning Environments) project. The project envisaged classrooms as innovative environments thanks to the National School 4.0 Plan, included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR).

2.3 Samples, tools and analysis procedures

Data collection took place in early September 2024, before the first teachers' meeting in which teachers were to discuss the results of the first year of the experiment and how it should continue (maintaining the same guidelines as the previous school year or with changes suggested by the teachers themselves).

Using a multi-stakeholder approach, teachers, pupils and families were interviewed in order to gather the various points of view of the school community on the non-graded assessment experiment.

This paper analyses and presents the two focus groups carried out with the teachers involved, who voluntarily agreed to be interviewed. The teachers were divided into two focus groups according to whether they belonged to the main school (*MS*) or the peripheral schools (*PS*). The decision to divide the teachers into two groups was due to the characteristics of the teaching staff at the three secondary schools: the main school is characterised by teachers who are very involved and interested in the experiment on assessment, while the other two groups of teachers at the PS experienced the experiment as a choice that was not theirs but imposed by the school leadership.

Both meetings took place on the same morning, with all teachers sitting in a circle to encourage discussion characterised by mutual listening and direct exchange. The discussion was introduced and led by the researcher, who placed an audio recorder in the centre of the circle so that all voices could be transcribed correctly. The discussion among the teachers at the main school lasted a total of 2 hours, 17 minutes and 59 seconds, corresponding to 105,311 characters (including spaces), while the PS discussed for 1 hour, 25 minutes and 7 seconds, transcribed into 68,137 characters (including spaces). For security reasons, no video recordings were made and all transcripts were anonymised, removing all specific references to proper names during transcription.

The two discussions were conducted by initially proposing an ice-breaking exercise and subsequently, some guiding questions were provided with the aim of stimulating participants to talk about their experiences, perceptions and practices related to the use of narrative feedback for ongoing assessment.

Based on the transcripts, a qualitative content analysis was conducted using a bottom-up approach, carried out with Atlas.ti software, following Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis model and divided into the following phases:

1. An initial analysis phase of both transcripts involved the creation of codes to identify emerging meanings in the texts by means of synthetic labels. This process led to the creation of a total of 51 analysis codes.
2. The second phase of analysis aimed to create a focused coding system, which led to the creation of five macro-categories of analysis, common to both focus groups. The macro-categories and their associated analysis codes are illustrated and discussed in paragraph 3.

3. Results

3.1. Results from teachers at the MS

The qualitative analysis conducted on the focus group with teachers from the MS complex led to the identification of five macro-categories for analysis (Table 1).

Macro-categorie	Fq. occorrenze	% occorrenze
Attitudes on assessment	83	40,10%
Assessment practices	51	24,64%
Assessment as a collaborative and shared process	31	14,98%
Reflections on experimentation	22	10,63%
Perceptions of students	20	9,66%
Total occurrences	207	100,00%

Table 1. Macro-categories of the main plexus analysis codes

The group of teachers mainly shared their perceptions of the experiment and what they individually experienced as a change in the teaching profession (40.10% of total occurrences), as well as sharing the various assessment practices they

implemented in their teaching (24.64%). Assessment was described as a shared and collaborative process between teachers and students (14.98%), thus stimulating reflections on the experiment and its future developments (10.63%). In part, teachers also reported their observations of students' perceptions of the change in the ongoing assessment system (9.66%).

With regard to "attitudes on assessment", most of the codes express a positive and confident view of the experiment and assessment as a process intrinsically linked to teaching and learning processes. 21.69% of the occurrences in this macro-category highlighted teachers' reflections on their own professionalism: the experiment led them to question their role and their teaching practices established over the years, developing new reflections and new ways of considering and communicating assessment in the classroom.

"... I realised that I had not explained clearly enough to everyone that [...] what I was asking for at that moment required a small leap in precision and quality [compared to primary school or the previous class]" 1:107 ¶ 97

Teachers expressed a view of assessment as a tool for education (14.46%) and improvement (10.84%). The experiences recounted during the focus group highlighted the potential of narrative feedback, which helps to express the complexity of students' learning processes, as opposed to grades, which merely "label" them.

"Even the student [found] satisfaction in the fact that the test had not gone all badly because it was not an average of many points where you had done something wonderful and then something terrible and the average was still there in the mud. [...] in the feedback, now [...] I can show and demonstrate how much he managed to achieve despite many mistakes when faced with this encouragement" 1:62 ¶ 144

12.05% of occurrences show an awareness of the impact that assessment can have on pupils, their self-esteem and motivation to learn. Furthermore, assessment is described as a process of comparison (9.64%) and shared between those who assess and those who are assessed using a "scale". The discussion among teachers also focuses on the difficulty of carrying out narrative assessment, especially in subjects with a reduced number of weekly hours.

As far as “assessment practices” are concerned, narrative feedback was the most frequently mentioned (35.29%, Fq. 18), associated with the use of assessment rubrics (19.61%), sometimes constructed in class with pupils based on a discussion of the assessment criteria (11.76%). A comparison of the various experiences of teachers reveals that families, and occasionally pupils, request numerical grades despite teachers being aware of the limitations of such feedback and claiming to “detest the idea of grades” 1:82 ¶ 220 (23.53%).

With regard to the category “assessment as a collaborative and shared process”, teachers at the MS emphasised the importance of the role of families (35.48% of occurrences in the macro-category) and how much what the family thinks is reflected daily in the experiment. In fact, there is a need, in the future, to share school innovation processes with families (6.45%).

“There is a typical phrase that students say: ‘because my mother wants me to get all positive grades, everything from eight upwards’ [but the pupils...] do not always have the ability to achieve this, but they are, sometimes they do not fixate on the grade they need to get for themselves, but on what their parents expect of them.” 1:32 ¶ 74

In addition, 32.26% of occurrences refer to the need to share the assessment process with pupils, both in the construction of criteria and in the communication of test results; despite this, 16.13% noted that there was insufficient sharing at the beginning of the year of a common vocabulary relating to the assessment of the structure and purpose of the experiment itself.

With regard to the macro-category “reflections on the experiment”, teachers expressed the difficulty of implementing such experiments in a context such as Italy, where different school levels adopt different assessment systems (45.45%). Furthermore, they emphasised the need not only to change the assessment system (the transition from grades to narrative feedback), but also to change the mindset, considering assessment as an opportunity to learn and improve (22.73%). Finally, teachers argue that sharing and discussion among colleagues is necessary in order to identify common practices and methods, so as to facilitate understanding among pupils and families (18.18%), as well as some new perspectives for continuing the experiment in the 2024/25 school year (13.64%).

“Children, families and sometimes even us [teachers] have a concept of assessment that, in my opinion, is not the correct one [...]. We must remove from

children this perception that if I make a mistake, I am a failure [...] So assessment is not a matter of “I am good” or “I am not good”, but rather “I have learned that thing” or “I haven’t got there yet, I don’t have the tools to do it yet”. 1:49 ¶ 122

With regard to the last macro-category, “perceptions of students” reported by teachers, the difficulties of the experiment itself emerge. Teachers report noticing a difficulty in students due to the absence of a reference system (30.00%), which did not help students understand their level of learning through the exclusive receipt of written feedback. For this reason, pupils appear disoriented (25.00%), with significant repercussions on their self-esteem (25.00%) and a certain indifference that has led them not to ask any questions about their learning path (10.00%). Despite this, 10.00% of the occurrences highlight a positive perception among students, as they have understood how narrative feedback can be a highly educational experience for them and aimed at their learning (10.00%).

3.2. Results from teachers at PS

The qualitative thematic analysis conducted on the focus group with teachers from the PS, led to the identification of five macro-categories for analysis, which completely overlap with the macro-categories already presented in paragraph 3.1 relating to the other school (Table 2).

Macro-categories	Fq. occurrences	% occurrences
Attitudes on assessment	40	36,04%
Assessment practices	35	31,53%
Students’ perceptions	24	21,62%
Reflections on experimentation	10	9,01%
Assessment as a collaborative and shared process	2	1,80%
Total occurrences	111	100,00%

Table 2. Macro-categories of analysis codes for PS

Similarly to the first group analysed, teachers in PS also mainly shared their perceptions of the experimentation and changes experienced in their teaching profession (36.04% of total occurrences), as well as illustrating the different assessment practices adopted in their teaching (31.53%). 21.62% of total occurrences report the perception of pupils observed by teachers and 9.01% report

teachers' reflections on experimentation. Finally, only 1.80% of total occurrences refer to assessment as a collaborative and shared process.

With regard to “attitudes on assessment”, 37.50% of occurrences relating to the macro-category express some resistance on the part of teachers to the introduction of the experiment, arguing that the use of grades was simpler (as well as being an established practice in our national context) and that it took much less time to assess.

“it was very difficult to switch to this experiment, because it was a profoundly different approach compared to numerical grades [...]” 2:32 ¶ 141

Associated with these considerations, 27.50% of the total occurrences express a view of assessment as “understanding the level of learning”, i.e. an assessment whose main and fundamental purpose is to ascertain the level of the student's learning. Teachers also stated that they consider assessment to be a tool for improvement (10.00%), a comparison with a reference system (7.50%) and an objective process carried out by the teacher (5.00%).

As regards “assessment practices”, narrative feedback is the most frequently cited practice (28.57%, Fq. 10), associated with the use of assessment levels, such as “basic” or “advanced” (20.00%). Grades are mentioned in 14.29% of cases, followed by the practice of general correction of tests (11.43%). Some teachers also state that they only enter feedback in the electronic register, forcing students to consult the electronic register to find out their assessment (11.43%), while others claim not to give feedback to students (8.57%). Only 5.71% refer to the use of assessment rubrics.

“The students keep asking me how the test went, and I reply, ‘I can't tell you because this year we have this type of assessment.[...]” 2:39 ¶ 192

With regard to the “perceptions of students” reported by teachers, half of the occurrences relate to students' requests to receive the assessment of a test they have taken. As also highlighted by the data from the focus group of the MS,, pupils report difficulty in understanding the assessments they receive due to the absence of a reference system (12.50%), as well as anxiety about assessment (12.50%) and comparisons between students stimulated by the teachers themselves (12.50%).

"[This assessment] is very dangerous because it can create a lot of anxiety and expectations, both for the children, i.e. on the part of the children, and on the part of the parents, but also on your part in expressing it." 2:6 ¶ 24 – 28

Finally, teachers report noticing confusion about how students are experiencing the experiment (8.33%) and the impact on self-esteem and motivation (4.17%).

In the macro-category "reflections on the experiment", the analysis codes mainly report difficulties in managing the experiment on the part of teachers (70.00%), expressing difficulty in changing their habits related to grading in favour of using narrative feedback.

"In my opinion, the assessment carried out this year was not effective. I say this because, for me, it was not effective [...] we need to revise the rubric and [...] change the objectives, make it simpler for both us and them, make some changes." 2:44 ¶ 208

Furthermore, this focus group also raises the issue of the variety of assessment systems that characterise our school context (20.00%), an aspect on which teachers focus in order to suggest proposals for the continuation of the experiment in the 2024/25 school year.

With regard to the last macro-category "assessment as a collaborative and shared process", teachers stated that they did not share the assessment criteria or, more generally, the assessment processes with their students (100.00%, Fq. 2).

4. Discussion

4.1 What are the conditions for teachers, involved in training and experimentation, to change their perceptions and statements of practice in relation to experimentation on assessment of learning?

In order to answer the research questions, we will compare the results of the two focus groups. For this first question, we consider data relating to the macro-categories "teachers' perceptions", "students' perceptions" and "reflections on the experiment".

With regard to teachers' perceptions, teachers at the MS expressed a positive view of their experience with narrative assessment. The data show that assessment was an opportunity to reflect on their teaching profession and educational role (21.69%)

as well as being considered a tool for educating (15.66%) and supporting the improvement of students' learning processes (10.84%). Colleagues from the PS, on the other hand, mainly expressed their resistance to the introduction of an alternative way of assessing learning through narrative feedback (37.00%). Furthermore, the data highlight a view of assessment as an understanding of the level of learning, thus approaching the summative assessment approach (27.50%).

With regard to the “perceptions of students” reported by teachers, the data from the two focus groups do not differ significantly. Both groups of teachers discussed the absence of a reference system that allows students to understand their level (an issue that is very easy to resolve if a scale of 1 to 10 is used, where 1 is the minimum and 10 is the maximum). Furthermore, although in different ways, the MS reported student disorientation (25.00%) and the PS reported confusion (8.33%) and anxiety (12.50%). These data show that all students had difficulty in understanding the narrative assessment experiment right from the start.

Finally, with regard to “reflections on the experiment”, teachers at the MS argue that there is a need for a change in the mindset of teachers, students and families in order to adapt to the new assessment system (22.73%), suggesting more discussion among colleagues (18.18%) and proposing other ways to improve the experiment (13.64%). On the contrary, teachers at the PS focused almost exclusively on the difficulties of managing the experiment during its first year of implementation (70.00%).

In conclusion, the data show that the change in perceptions and statements of practices occurred only in the MS, where teachers had enthusiastically embraced the experiment. While highlighting the difficulties and critical aspects of such experiments, teachers at the MS questioned their own role and habits in order to experiment with a new method of assessment using narrative feedback. At the MS, teachers showed that they had begun to reflect on the importance of assessment as an opportunity for dialogue with pupils in order to support continuous learning and improvement:

"[...] Because assessment must [...] improve the person, encourage them to improve and not discourage them. [...]" 1:25 ¶ 55.

In the PS, on the other hand, perceptions and practices remain linked to the “traditional” ones of summative assessment, in which there is little student involvement in the assessment processes.

4.2 Which specific assessment practices undergo changes according to teachers' perceptions?

In order to observe the extent to which there has been a change in perceptions and statements regarding practices, we intend to analyse the macro-categories “assessment practices” and “assessment as a collaborative and shared process”.

The data from the MS highlights the main use of narrative feedback (35.29%) and assessment rubrics (19.61%). In addition, it should be noted that pupils are actively involved in the assessment processes through the construction of assessment criteria (11.76%) and self-assessment (3.92%) in the classroom.

In PS, on the other hand, teachers report that they use narrative feedback (28.57%), but this is sometimes communicated only through the electronic register (11.43%). 11.43% of occurrences report a practice among teachers of correcting tests together with the whole class in a vague and general manner, thus failing to provide specific feedback to individual pupils on what they got wrong or suggesting ways to improve their learning. These methods indicate a reduced level of student participation in assessment processes.

These statements are also confirmed by data relating to the macro-category “assessment as a collaborative and shared process”. The MS discusses the need to involve families (35.48%) in the design and structuring of experiments so that they can become allies in the implementation of assessment for learning (6.45%). In addition, teachers reflect on a vision of assessment as a shared and co-participatory process with pupils who are involved in the production of assessment rubrics and narrative feedback (32.36%).

“When doing more specific work, I sometimes find myself saying to the children, ‘OK, how do we assess this?’, [...] It's clear that I can't use the same rubric, so together we created a sort of shared rubric for them.” 1:13 ¶ 27

In contrast, PS simply stated that they did not share any part of the assessment process with students.

Conclusion

This research was conducted with the aim of exploring the perceptions and statements of teachers involved in an experiment that introduced narrative

feedback as an alternative to numerical grading during the school year. Although the results were obtained in the specific context of a comprehensive school in the province of Padua and therefore cannot be generalised, they allow us to propose some final considerations.

With regard to the conditions that allow teachers to change their perceptions and statements about practices, the group of teachers who were involved from the outset in the design and implementation of the experiment showed that they had changed their perceptions and, more generally, had a proactive attitude towards the assessment experiment. On the contrary, teachers who experienced the experiment as an imposition by the school management highlight its critical issues and the difficulties they experienced in the first experimental year.

With regard to what the changes were, the teachers of the MS complex discussed assessment practices that involve students as actors in the assessment processes, carrying out a co-participatory assessment. The other group of teachers, on the other hand, stated that they did not involve students in assessment practices.

In conclusion, this study confirms the importance of sharing innovative school processes with teachers from the earliest stages, ensuring that their ideas and beliefs are the starting point for developing innovative processes that enable schools to continuously adapt to social changes (Vähäsantanen, 2015; Carletti 2015).

Author contributions

The contribution is the result of a joint effort between the authors. Giorgia Slaviero wrote the contribution, while Valentina Grion supervised the entire drafting of the article.

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