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The evaluation process as a model of social determinism

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Abstract

This paper addresses a central theme of the contemporary debate on education: the concept of evaluation. In particular, the reflection starts from a recognition of the theories of educational evaluation, to reach consideration that concerns the promotion of equality and equity through evaluation process. Recently, educational organizations have changed profoundly and terms like *complexity* and *system* are part of the scholastic terminology. Complexity that characterized today society requires a new way of knowing, studying and discovering reality, according to a different cultural paradigm which often share the same spaces. The purpose of this contribution is to recognize to the evaluation process the merit of promoting knowledge of reality, particularly of that scholastic one, and to promote the recognition the student individualism in a community, taking into consideration the principles of equality and equity.

Keywords: Evaluation, Value, Equity, Equality, Educational system.

Introduction

In contemporary debate it is recognized that the importance of evaluation practices derives from the increasing social complexity, characterized by the *constant process of change* (Giddens, 1990), in which numerous causes intervene, such as:

- the increase in variables that changes social actors' behaviour;
- the decrease in heuristic capacities of *structural variables* (educational qualification, social background, also gender or/and age differences) on individual behavior;
- the growth in the number of institutional operators acting in the social, economic and political sphere;
- the speed of change in different domains of humans' activity.

The evolution of social programs also had enormous impacts on the role of evaluation processes, which are nowadays such a vital part in international policies, in terms of responsibility and awareness.

In fact, evaluation practice is today considered a necessary step in the implementation of interventions aimed in promoting measures and projects in the field of social policies, from social-health and welfare, to urban and social sustainability, through technological innovation and researches applied to the improvement of social well-being.

Evaluation develops within real decision-making processes within which, however, the traditional, rational and conceptual model meets several obstacles to its full realization.

Evaluation processes take place in real, dynamic, changing contexts, often characterized by conflicts, oppositions between different groups in the interpretation of the problem, as well as in the solutions to be adopted and in the order of priorities to be attributed. The relationship between evaluative data and decision-making, therefore, is not linear and unambiguous as established by rational models of problem solving, precisely because it assumes a political value. The evaluation process, in general, wants to determine the value of something or the degree of achievement of fixed objectives and correspondence to the real needs of consumers.

Evaluation, far from being a mere instrumental procedure, plays a preeminent role in the teaching/learning process. The evaluation process is in fact the result of a deliberate action that allows the evaluator to reflect critically around educational issues, accompanying the project from the analysis of needs to reporting (Iannotta, 2018), because it "describes-measures-judges" (Dewey, 1939) the transformative processes towards the established ends.

Therefore, evaluation is an important activity that contributes to the construction-modification of social programs, although certainly it is neither the only nor the most influential among the variables. Many factors control and influence the action of the decision-makers: the balance between different interest groups, the ascendancy of individuals or group, the sensitivity towards the problems to be faced, the continuous changes that the agenda of priorities undergoes as a function of succession of the historical-political periods. At the origin of the idea of evaluation there is

the conviction that between knowledge and human action there is a very precise connection of a logical nature: the conviction that in order to rationally act, to achieve a goal, it is necessary *to know*. This principle translates into the recognition of a cognitive need of the community, aimed at a rational use of the resources already invested or even to invest, in social activities for the well-being of the members of a community. In this paper, the authors try to outline epistemological reasons for social evaluation procedures, specifically with regard to the assessment in formal learning contexts. The study of evaluation process, an essential component of didactics, permits the application of control procedures to guarantee equality and equity.

1. The epistemological reasons of evaluation

The evaluation process, wrote Scriven in the 1973, means to determine and to discriminate both the intrinsic and extrinsic merit or the value of something, in other words the degree of achievement of fixed objectives and correspondence to the real needs of users. In the educational field, the purpose of evaluation cannot correspond to a simple judgement, but rather it consists in the attribution of value to facts, events and objects in relation to the goals that the evaluator intends to pursue (Notti, 2014, p. 12).

The Evaluation is above all a pedagogical fact that requires reasonable choices with considering the “educational fact” (Notti, 2010), these choices are situated inside a precise project. The education process means to create the right condition in order the person can to grow and to affirm his own identity. The assessment is a planned and methodical process of data collection related to educational facts, it leads to a value judgment that doesn’t end in itself, but aims at educational action (Beeby, 1977). The evaluation represents an important and central action of education process, it is the moment of critical analysis, reflection, rethinking of the planned intervention, it provides the essential information to understand how to adapt the education setting according to the objectives defined (Galliani, Notti, 2014). To evaluate in the educational field means to examine the structure and all other elements of educational intervention, it means also to investigate about individual and group aspects and on organizational

and methodological aspects (Galliani, Notti, 2014). The evaluation is the preferred instrument in order to regulate educational actions and to identify appropriate improvements. (Barbier, 1977).

The evaluation process involves attribution of “value”, now it is worth asking about what is a “value”. “... It is daily experience that the values commit us to establish priorities among themselves in order to decide the judgment to formulate or the behavior to implement; at the same time is an existential fact that disagreement around values are not associated to their recognition as such, but about the position we assign to them” (Damiano, 2012, p.25).

Regarding the *position of value*, the literature refers to the pedagogical philosopher John Dewey and his work *Theory of Evaluation* (1939) in which the author starts from considerations involving to science defining it not only as a set of new knowledge to which man comes, but science also as process, method, then all tools that lead the person to such knowledge. His reflections also recognize the *value* of what is preliminary to knowledge, then proceeding with scientific precision and all that it involves: observation, analysis, discrimination, investigation. When man acts, he knows, because every action produces new knowledge; knowledge exists thanks to the process of knowing.

The evaluation exists because it is necessary to assign value to performance and not to people, to appreciate what has been achieved, “the educational evaluation must draw attention to positive aspects of a performance and not the negative ones” (Notti, 2014, p.21), we evaluate because teachers and students can recalibrate their compass, because it is necessary to analyze the instruments in view of new horizons, to regulate the action and improve the results. Pellerey believes that “the effects of [...] evaluation influence the continuation of studies, but also the perception of oneself, the confidence in your own abilities, it produces effects also about the respect of adults and classmates, the type of relationship established between teachers and students, as well as, on the short-term choices and long-term decisions. Moreover, the evaluation system used in the school, with its purposes, its methods and the way in which judgments are communicated to students and parents, offers values - or disvalues - that are gradually internalized both by the subject, the local community, and by society, more generally. Is not possible not evaluate, if it were possible, would make the educational relationship difficult or

impossible. Everyone must receive a reaction, approval or disapproval, in relation to one's work, otherwise it would create a state of fear and ambiguity" (Pellerey, 1994, p. 133).

2. Evaluation as equality and equity

For many years the school has been based on an exclusively disciplinary-notionistic approach, a school based on a transmissive teaching, it was a place where was in force a passive and dull didactic, then a punitive or rewarding assessment. Contrary to this situation, recently the educational system has changed profoundly, the terms of *complexity* and *system* are today part of scholastic terminology, in this way has changed the vision inside and outside of the school. Complexity requires a new way of knowing, investigating and exploring of reality, according to a different cultural paradigm defined by Morin (1991) as a *complex rationality*. The educational process becomes complex, therefore it follows that the teaching also becomes problematized, relational and communicative, as well as, the evaluation converts in formative. Today the school is a system that opens its own towards the external environment, so the school is no longer a monad, closed and isolated, but part of an environment with which the school maintains constant relation, while keeping its own peculiarity. The deep revolutions of society have transformed the formation, giving it a character of solid complexity. Nowadays, most of the postmodern countries identify in the effectiveness and efficiency of their educational systems and in the development of human resources as the fundamental elements to ensure high and qualified levels of training, to ensure competitiveness and development of the productive system and to promote citizenship education, as well as the democratic growth of their communities. Then the need that educational procedure becomes a dynamic, adaptive and planned process. All this involves attributing to the formative act characters, connotations and quality values (Ferrantino, 2018, p.65). These considerations can be furthermore analyzed through the characteristics of the educational quality defined by Egle Becchi (2000). The author distinguishes five meanings of quality:

- *quality in the sense of excellence*, that is a special quality, which doesn't need to be evaluated. It is an obvious, self-referential and perfect quality;
- *quality as the achievement of the established standards*, that is quality in the sense of productivity, and responds to pre-defined criteria and ideas;
- *quality as conformity to particular specifications*, that is when the user expresses preferences and needs through the voice of specialists and the latter translate them into services;
- *quality as adequacy to the objective*, that is an assessment of what has been declared by the institution and what has actually been achieved;
- *quality in a transformative sense*, it refers to idea of a quality that transforms, which produces changes in all the subjects involved in the educational process (students, teachers, parents, etc.). It represents the most appropriate way to understand quality at school (Notti, 2010, p. 83).

The evaluation, in the educational field, is not limited to the evaluation of learning because it considers a systemic dimension, that is the scholastic context within which to place the work of the single school and the evaluation of the educational Institutions and of other institutions that provide training, through a local, national and international comparison (Ferrantino, 2018). The evaluation action is neither linear nor can it be placed in a precise point of the formative process, as it was in traditional didactics, now it becomes procedural and circular, it is part of the whole training path. Today is not possible to consider the evaluation only as a technical act of comparison of empirical data, actually it gives value (Notti, 2014), it follows that evaluation "is not to establish factual mathematical data, but to assign a value through principles which are shared, by convention, by everyone. Evaluation process is also an interpretative action (I don't limit myself to registering a fact, but I add value to a fact on the basis of a more or less explicit agreement or a more or less shared agreement)" (Citran, 2016). At this point it is reasonable to explain which are the value choices involved in the evaluation. Important aspects are certainly the promotion of cultural diversity, the development of personal identity, equality and inclusion, values that, naturally, cannot be taught but they represent the substratum on which the whole educational action acts. Galliani (2011) affirms that the formative evaluation, although centered in the present,

looks far away, has a glance towards what is in progress, describes, measures, judges the transformations towards a purpose considered “good” or “better” (p. 50). The end-value on which these authors will focus is that of *equality*, this is the matrix of all the values to which the school must inspire, however the equality alone it is not sufficient to guarantee homogeneous learning and/or adequate to the potential of each student, with equality alone there is the risk of producing further inequalities. This is why this term has been joined, for several years, by the concept of *equity* (Benadusi, 2006; Bottani, 2009). This term doesn’t mean homologation, but diversification, it requires a teaching that considers characteristics of each student, it has to offer incentives not reducible to undifferentiated and standardized schemes, because the purpose of equity is to develop the potential of individuals to the highest degree, without falling in the trap of flattening or leveling the formative path, taking into account only the slower students or those who are in the socio-cultural disadvantage, equity must guarantee everyone the right to quality education (Besozzi, 2009). It is superfluous to underline that a uniform and “equal for all” treatment doesn’t correspond to a real equity of formative opportunities, if the educator does not take into consideration differences of pupils, it means to perpetrate inequalities. Equity, therefore, feeds on the difference, recognizes it, appreciates it and acts in its name, regulates the moments and actions that motivate the teaching-learning process, if not there would certainly be a climate of discontent, dissatisfaction and passivity, both in those who live in a poor reality, because they come from families culturally deprived of cultural stimuli, and socially on the margins, both in those who, instead, adequately inserted in the social fabric of belonging, they are the “good” of the class, the able, talented people with perfect performances. Equity is not in contrast with equality, rather it is its extension; where equality records differences, equity acts through a broader framework of effectiveness, efficiency and quality. Equity, therefore, implies that the training process offers the same opportunities to each student, giving value to the merit of each one. If we consider the idea that the school should limit itself to taking note of inequalities, then the concept of merit would obviously lead to a model of learning that is the result of *social determinism*, there are countless studies that demonstrate a clear link between an individuals’ abilities and his social background. If, on

the other hand, it is believed that school must not only register inequalities but offers *equal opportunities*, then the concept of merit must plan individualized and non-homologous mechanisms.

Only after that the school has placed every individual in the same conditions to act, then and only then, we can talk about merit of students capable of better performances than others; all these considerations lead to the conclusion that capacities are not intended as innate qualities, on the other hand “it is not possible to think that merit is the result of a genetic lottery” (Baldacci, 2014, p.136). Don Milani’s lesson (1967) is always of great relevance and authenticity, an equitable school is not limited to reward the skills because “there is no merit in belonging to a socially advantaged family or in having inherited a good genetic background, a *right* school aims to cover inequalities (or at least shorten them), trying to assure all learners the right of complete training and optimal development of all capacities” (p. 137). It can, therefore, be said that to guarantee a right equality it is essential to adopt diversified paths by offering unequal *chances* of learning. Here it is necessary the reference to Rawls' work (2008) “undeserved inequalities require reparation, and since the inequalities of birth and natural gifts are undeserved, they need to be compensated in some way” (p. 110). The theoretical conceptions, which were discussed before, on the methodological field translate into two didactic measures: *individualization* and *personalization*. Since the school makes the idea of heterogeneity its own, the evaluation no longer has the character of exclusion but of inclusion. Therefore, through individualization, teachers, after having established the founding basis of each discipline, will plan different didactic activities, using different and flexible methods and strategies, but which will lead to a common educational goal, thus guaranteeing *equality of training opportunities*. “In other words, the school is asked to realize an equality that is not purely formal, in terms of access or treatment, but that more substantial and significant of mastery of basic competences” (Baldacci, 2006, pp. 10-11). At this point it is reasonable to affirm that the same classical methodology, that is the *didactic method*, shows traits of anachronism, in fact the sequential relationship that exists between theory and techniques, is at the origin of the limits of this practice, since the definition of the educational itineraries precedes the knowledge of the characteristics of the learner. The didactic method has been,

gradually, dated by the concept of *strategy*, that is, by that multi-differentiated set of operational choices, whose activation cannot be separated from the needs and specific characteristics of each student (Bonazza, 2014). To develop an active learning means that educational agencies have to use didactic methodologies centered on teaching, but also those centered on learning and then to promote the knowledge through methodologies such as: *active learning, cooperative learning, problem solving and role playing* (Vegliante, 2016). The ultimate goal of the school is not to homologate, but to identify, to support and to care potentialities and inclinations of everyone. When it is evaluated individualization, a path that involves different times, strategies, methods but which tends towards a single goal, it is inevitable to refer to performance models estimated desirable and/or acceptable. The evaluation therefore in this case tends to favour the quantitative, measurable aspect through the use of structured and semi-structured tests, without to lose sight of the main objective. The latter must be transversal to all activities, and must develop in students a metacognitive awareness of their knowledge, skills and competences.

The evaluation of personalization, instead, wants the students to acquire awareness of their talents, possibilities, strengths and preferences to allow them to develop them. Here the evaluative action becomes democratic because it allows to co-construct one's own evaluation through awareness of what has been done and what still it is necessary to do, in one word: self-assessment. Talking about self-assessment involves redefining the subject that learns. The subject, from passive becomes active protagonist of the training process, aware of his own knowledge and above all of his cognitive style, able to give meaning and value to the whole learning process. In terms of personalization, the evaluation aims to enhance differences, to give each student the opportunity to develop their own potential and preferences, without falling into the error of considering these as innate forms of capacity. They are, actually, the result of hereditary, environmental and cultural information. For this reason, it is preferable that the analysis of talents and predispositions is always "a provisional budget that is placed in a route open to different developments" (Baldacci, 2002, p. 166). In this framework the evaluation is essentially qualitative, it becomes a starting point for reflection on the experience in progress, an experience that has upstream a flexible teaching

in terms of time and space, sensitive to the characteristics of the reference environment to reach the *training system integrated* (Frabboni, Pinto and Minerva, 1998) that is a real collaboration among the educational agencies of the territory: school, family, local institution, associations and stipulate a real “iron pact” among them.

Conclusions

Evaluation accompanies educational design, from the beginning to the conclusion of the teaching/learning process. In the educational context, evaluation is a structured process in which there is the need for well-founded, objectively formulated argumentative bases inserted in a relationship established aprioristically between the evaluator and the examined. The student, according to the constructivist-social approach, becomes critically involved in his educational process. For this reason, the evaluation expresses the necessity to have a scientific method that can guarantee, on the one hand, the reflective practice (of all the stakeholders involved in the teaching/learning process), on the other the reporting of the cognitive process of a specific educational reality. As mentioned above, the evaluation process wants to determine both the intrinsic and extrinsic value of something and in formal educational contexts, the main objective of the assessment is not a simple judgement: it involves the attribution of value to facts, events and objects, or *performance*, in relation to the goals that have been declared in educational. It is good to say again that evaluation is not limited to the evaluation of learning products because it is necessary to take consideration to the systemic dimension; for this reason, the evaluation process is neither linear nor it can be placed in a precise moment of the educational path, as it was in traditional didactics practices. Significant characteristics of the evaluation process, among other features, are the promotion of cultural diversity, the development of personal identity, equality and inclusion, values that cannot be qualified but they represent the substratum on which facing the whole educational action. Evaluative processes, therefore, wherever they are organized according to the appropriate methodological and instrumental criteria, can benefit social inclusion, equity and the control of the quality of the educational offer

provided. The evaluation, also in the form of educational assessment, is always a pedagogical fact that requires rational choices which correspond to precise project. The education process means to create the right condition in order the person can to grow and to affirm his own identity, in a specific cultural dimension.

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