

Toward the Consolidation of a Sociology of Classroom Assessment: A Narrative Review of the French-Language Literature

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Article abstract

In this article, we propose a consolidation in the field of sociology of classroom assessment, continuing the efforts made in this direction in the 1990s. Updating this field is crucial in order to better understand, among other things, the changes that have occurred in student learning assessment practices following the implementation of the New Public Management. We offer a literature review of 59 French-language articles closely related to the sociology of classroom assessment. Our analysis highlights four categories of sociological issues arising from this literature: 1) the instructive function of assessment and progression of learning; 2) the assessment of ability to act and adaptation to complex contexts; 3) external and standardized assessment and producing measurable results; and 4) assessment as the manifestation of norms of excellence and the democratization of schooling success. We conclude with a presentation of research perspectives that would promote the consolidation of this field.

Toward the Consolidation of a Sociology of Classroom Assessment: A Narrative Review of the French-Language Literature

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MOTS CLÉS : sociologie, évaluation scolaire, nouvelle gestion publique, normes d'excellence, réussite scolaire

Cet article vise à proposer une consolidation du domaine de la sociologie de l'évaluation scolaire, dans la suite des efforts entrepris en ce sens dans les années 1990. La mise à jour de ce domaine est cruciale, entre autres pour comprendre les changements survenus dans les pratiques d'évaluation des apprentissages des élèves à la suite de la mise en place de la Nouvelle gestion publique. Pour ce faire, nous proposons une synthèse des connaissances adossée à l'analyse de 59 textes en français entretenant des liens étroits avec une sociologie de l'évaluation scolaire. Notre analyse fait ressortir quatre catégories d'enjeux sociologiques découlant de cette littérature : 1) la fonction formative de l'évaluation et la progression des apprentissages ; 2) l'évaluation d'un savoir agir et l'adaptation aux contextes complexes ; 3) l'évaluation externe et standardisée, et la fabrication des résultats mesurables ; et 4) l'évaluation comme matérialisation des normes d'excellence et la démocratisation de la réussite scolaire. Nous concluons avec la présentation de perspectives de recherche qui favoriseraient la consolidation de ce domaine.

KEY WORDS: sociology, classroom assessment, new public management, norms of excellence, school success

In this article, we propose a consolidation in the field of sociology of classroom assessment, continuing the efforts made in this direction in the 1990s. Updating this field is crucial in order to better understand, among other things, the changes that have occurred in student learning assessment practices following the implementation of the New Public Management. We offer a literature review of 59 French-language articles closely related to the sociology of classroom assessment. Our analysis highlights four categories of sociological issues arising from this literature: 1) the instructive function of assessment and progression of learning; 2) the assessment of ability to act and adaptation to complex contexts; 3) external and standardized assessment and producing measurable results; and 4) assessment as the manifestation of norms of excellence and the democratization of schooling success. We conclude with a presentation of research perspectives that would promote the consolidation of this field.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: sociologia, avaliação escolar, nova gestão pública, padrões de excelência, sucesso escolar

Este artigo tem como objetivo propor a consolidação do campo da sociologia da avaliação escolar, a partir dos esforços empreendidos neste sentido na década de 1990. A atualização deste campo é fundamental, entre outras coisas, para compreender as mudanças ocorridas nas práticas de avaliação das aprendizagens dos alunos após a implementação da nova gestão pública. Para isso, oferecemos uma síntese dos conhecimentos apoiada na análise de 59 textos em francês, mantendo uma estreita ligação com uma sociologia da avaliação escolar. A nossa análise destaca quatro categorias de questões sociológicas decorrentes dessa literatura: 1) a função formativa da avaliação e a progressão das aprendizagens; 2) a avaliação do saber-fazer e a adaptação a contextos complexos; 3) a avaliação externa e estandardizada e produção de resultados mensuráveis; e 4) avaliação como materialização de padrões de excelência e a democratização do sucesso escolar. Concluímos com a apresentação de perspectivas de investigação que poderão favorecer a consolidação deste campo.

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Introduction

This article presents the results of a study (CRSH 2018-2019) that proposes the consolidation of the sociology of classroom assessment from this theory-based project. To our knowledge, this field has not been developed since the 1990s. In the current context, the project is specifically relevant as a contribution to the examination of the effects of emphasis on assessing learning and generating numerical grades. The latter are considered necessary for comparative purposes, in light of the changes introduced by the New Public Management (NPM) (Lessard, 2014; Maroy, 2017). Depending on the national context, implementation of the NPM began before the 1990s, and we have been able to document its impacts over the last 29 years and to observe the huge groundswell of support that continues to this day.

The work of teachers in many countries is currently hampered by this situation, which raises social issues on which a sociology of classroom assessment can shed light. Discussions about schools, assessment, and marks are driving public debate, particularly because they involve values that are central to society: merit, social justice, cultural heritage, the status of truth, and personal fulfillment (Mangez, 2008). Furthermore, a sociology of classroom assessment is not limited to shedding light on issues related to the assessment of student learning, as its scope of relevance extends to the system itself and, therefore, to programs and policies in a transnational or international perspective.

The field of sociological research on classroom assessment is very broad. The only study in the French-speaking world that has attempted to synthesize this theoretical field is the analysis by Merle (1998). The author's synthesis is incomplete and raises debates about such issues as corrections of bias, that are somewhat outdated today because they fall outside the current context, making the field of classroom assessment highly relevant once again.

In the English-speaking world, an emerging field – *Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation* – is being established, as evidenced by knowledge synthesis (Beljean, 2012; Krüger & Reinhart, 2017; Lamont, 2012). This field goes far beyond classroom assessment for it relates to all evaluative practices that affect human action, including not only education, but also institutional evaluation and the evaluation of goods, as well as the evaluation of symbolic and artistic productions and sports performance. In other words, it is not specific to classroom assessment.

Therefore, the sociology of classroom assessment is in need of consolidation because, although there is a community of interest, i.e., researchers who draw on its perspectives, their work is neither synthesized nor organized. Our contribution aims to establish connections between them through an analysis of the literature in French, starting with a theoretical overview of the field. This analysis can then be completed by a review of the English literature.

Theoretical Framework

A few theoretical details about classroom assessment studies

Student assessment practices have been approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives, specifically (a) docimology approaches to learning assessment; (b) deterministic theories of social representation; and (c) interactional and situational theories of assessment (Merle, 2012).

Docimology approaches to learning assessment

Firstly, docimology approaches use a descriptive-statistical approach toward grades produced by assessment practices. Since the emergence of classic docimology studies in the 1970s (Aymes, 1979; Bonniol et al., 1972), the quest for a “fair” grade is thought to be unrealistic. Biases in marking have been linked by this research to variables, such as the order in which papers are marked or the teacher’s expertise. However, the docimology approach is regarded as ahistorical and asocial (Merle, 2012).

Deterministic theories of social reproduction

Deterministic theories of social reproduction focus on the analysis of contextual determinants related to teaching practices and the effects of the student’s socio-academic status on educational outcomes. They point to “biases” or assessment errors in the processes of judging students,

biases caused by information about them. These theories have their limitations because they posit that stereotypes exist among teachers that would explain the biases in the grades given, such as a partiality toward good students (Merle, 2012).

Interactional and situational theories of assessment

Lastly, interactional and situational theories offer an insight into the in-context dynamics between teachers and students to explain the biases of marking. From this perspective, the evaluator and the evaluated are always in an interpersonal relationship characterized by their respective social positions within a power relationship, which influences their reciprocal conduct. The uncertainty associated with a grade can be explained by the existence of arrangements regarding student evaluations that are related to the tension between institutional marking requirements and the goal of supporting student learning (Merle, 2012).

Taking into account the different approaches presented here, our contribution aims (a) to consolidate the sociology of classroom assessment by analyzing the sociological issues that have emerged from empirical and conceptual research in French over the last 30 years; and (b) in support of this analysis, to identify up-to-date research perspectives and studies on the sociology of classroom assessment relating to problems that primarily concern students and teachers as well as the current environment of emphasis on assessment.

Methodology

By searching different scientific banks of articles (Cairn, Érudit, FRANCIS, and Google Scholar) in 2018, using the keywords “évaluation scolaire” (classroom assessment) and other related terms (“sociologie de l’évaluation” (sociology of assessment); “évaluation des apprentissages / des acquis” (learning / achievement assessment); and “évaluation certificative / sommative / formative / formatrice” (certificate-based / summative / formative assessment), we found 2,518 works in French that met the following inclusion criteria:

- 1) Texts had to have been published in the past 30 years (between 1988 and 2018).
- 2) They could be books, chapters, articles, or dissertations and theses.

- 3) Those related to empirical research could involve qualitative and/or quantitative research methods.

During this first selection stage, we read the titles and summaries of each document and then assessed the relevance of the content to our research objectives. The articles selected for the second stage, i.e., in-depth analysis, had to include a conceptual sociological framework for classroom assessment (see the Theoretical Framework section), or address classroom assessment in relation to socio-economic or socio-political issues (effects of assessment practices on students, power relationships between the actors involved, social triaging, etc.). Articles rooted in other sociology of education approaches (curricula, professional groups, etc.) were not retained, as they cover numerous topics that do not directly concern the assessment of student learning, to which our proposal is limited.

This last criterion enabled us to identify 72 documents in French. After reading all of them, we extracted a corpus of 59 documents for the third stage (46 articles,¹ 8 book chapters, 3 books, 1 report, and 1 news item),² which we considered the most relevant in order to provide an overview of the field through an in-depth analysis.³

To enrich this analysis, we drew on other documentation⁴ that provided perspective; it was added during the course of the analysis and chosen for its complementary contribution to the corpus. We then conducted an inductive thematic analysis by reading and coding three hard copy articles to create an initial list of themes – our first stage. Next, we coded the themes, using QDA Miner software. This generated 43 themes, which covered various aspects of assessment (such as functions and purposes of assessment, reforms and management in education systems, ethical issues and professional judgment, standardized assessment, etc.) The identified themes were grouped into four broad categories, based on the main sociological issues that seem to define the field of classroom assessment, and are presented in the following section.

Our study was not intended to be comprehensive. Our goal was to look at how the sociological issues raised by the grouping and comparison of these texts can help to delineate the scope of a new theoretical field. To this end, we conducted a “narrative review of the literature,” which requires an iterative rather than a comprehensive research method and which highlights the researcher’s reflective expertise and judgment (Rhoades, 2011).

Results and Discussion

The main sociological issues specific to classroom assessment

The sociological issues extracted from the corpus produced four main categories:⁵ 1) formative function of assessment and progression of learning; 2) assessment of the ability to act and the adaptation to complex tasks; 3) external and standardized assessment and production of “measurable” results; and 4) assessment as achievement of norms of excellence and democratization of schooling success.

Formative function of assessment and progression of learning

Student success is the topic that comes up most frequently in the articles analyzed, and it is almost always linked to developing an assessment based on student progress and related support; hence, the association made with so-called formative assessment. For at least four decades, this function of assessment has been implemented in school systems in a number of countries under various names (assessment for learning, formative assessment, etc.). It is seen as a necessary component of any evaluative practice that serves teachers, students, and decision-making by school authorities (Deaudelin et al., 2007; Laveault, 2014) and is the cornerstone of the most recent educational reforms aimed at getting more students through school successfully (Laveault, 2009; Mangez, 2008).

Formative assessment is commonly understood as a cyclical process by which teachers, in their interactions with students, collect and process information about teaching and learning activities to assess student progress and to provide feedback that helps students activate internal regulatory processes (Deaudelin et al., 2007). This function is also seen as a solution to the growing heterogeneity of class groups, since taking stock of each student’s situation through targeted learning allows the teacher to choose the support strategies that best suit the different needs of their students (Carette and Dupriez, 2009). Thus, it also serves education by focusing on the learning process rather than on outcomes (Morrissette, 2009).

Given the importance of the assessment function, we can conclude that this was a true paradigm that emerged slowly. Here it should be remembered that assessment

as a scientific, formal and intentional activity, developed in the broader context of the emergence of the social sciences and humanities in the 19th century. It inherited epistemological assumptions that required a separation between the subject-evaluator and the evaluated object (Rodrigues and Machado, 2012, p. 148).

Under the influence of the positivist paradigm, assessment was considered an objective process, but this assumption was gradually called into question, especially from the 1960s and 1970s onward, notably for epistemological reasons (Rodrigues and Machado, 2012). As explained above, classical docimology studies have shown that the quest for a “fair” grade is unrealistic. Socio-political reasons underlie this questioning (Rodrigues and Machado, 2012) by proponents of deterministic research, who have criticized classroom assessment for its role in the propagation of social inequalities. One of the most significant contributions of sociological research from the 1960s to the 1980s was to emphasize that “the evaluator never marks a paper per se [and that] marking involves comparing student work, and this cannot be done without being influenced by specific academic and extracurricular information” (Merle, 2012, p. 85). Certain assessment practices therefore disadvantaged students from less affluent backgrounds.

More recent studies tend to adopt interactional perspectives on learning assessment. Assessment is viewed as akin to a process of constructing and negotiating performance, because the values, norms, and judgments underpinning it are contained in the agreements that bind the people involved (Cogérino, 2002; Hadji, 1997; Issaieva et al., 2011; Perrenoud, 1989). Thus, it is a social act (Dépret and Filisetti, 2001; Dubois, 2006) that stems from evaluative arrangements (Merle, 1996, 2012); grades are generated through relatively explicit negotiations among protagonists of the educational relationship. Assessment also depends on the values held by teachers and their characterization of classroom achievement, which also reflects an assessment of how involved students are and how hard they work to progress and comply with school rules (Cogérino, 2002; Hadji, 1997). As some authors point out (Cogérino and Mnaffakh, 2008; Jeffrey, 2013; Merle, 2002; Morrisette and Legendre, 2011; Vanoutrive et al., 2011), these evaluative arrangements are rooted in differing demonstrations of fairness and in a strong presence of norms relating to effort, or in issues of power and authority. This means that the teacher makes statements not only about how well students meet their expectations “but

also, at least implicitly (and sometimes explicitly), about the relationship between the teacher and the assessed, asserting something of the value and place of each” (Hadji, 1997, p. 15).

By exposing the socio-cultural biases associated with the dominant assessment paradigm, this socio-epistemological challenge has paved the way to a major redefinition of the formative assessment approach (Figari, 2012). This has occurred in conjunction with an attempt to focus the assessment on the subjects assessed, formerly regarded as mere objects. They are now protagonists in the development of training methods intended specifically for them (Rodrigues and Machado, 2012). This vision – based on the idea that assessment promotes progression of learning rather than punishment – would bring the functioning of the school system closer to the cognitive and cultural references of the students themselves, thus encouraging students to succeed despite their differences.

That said, many studies on the professionalism of teachers suggest that they still have difficulty integrating the formative function of assessment into their daily work (Bélair and Dionne, 2009; Laveault, 2009; Monney and Fontaine, 2016; Mottier Lopez and Cattafi, 2008). Given this situation, how can they assess student progress? What does the word “progress” even mean? Progress toward what, toward what norms (Morrissette, 2009)? It appears that teachers continue to confuse formative and summative assessment, and that they offer few opportunities for students to implement the self-regulation strategies at the heart of the formative process (Cogérino and Mnaffakh, 2008; Deaudelin et al., 2007; De Ketele, 2010). Other publications suggest that the education level influences the approach teachers take, with secondary school teachers prioritizing the certification and discriminatory purpose of assessment, unlike their elementary school colleagues (Chouinard et al., 2005 and Soussi et al., 2006, quoted in Issaieva et al., 2011). Lastly, researchers point to a paradox: formative assessment is perceived by students and their parents to be of no importance (Endrizzzi and Rey, 2008) and is thus devalued within certain social groups, but teachers use it because it is socially desirable (Issaieva et al., 2011).

Assessment of the ability to act and adaptation to complex tasks

Another sociological category, also part of the interactional approach, stems from the perceived need to reconcile learning content with everyday situations and to promote the integration and use of knowledge in families of complex and authentic tasks, an idea underlying the most recent

reforms in many Western countries. Fundamental issues here include the meaning of school-based learning and the ability to respond to situations. This vision is legitimized in political discourse within the new globalized economy. To accomplish this, most recent curricular changes emphasize the idea of competency, which has revived the issues of learning transfer and learning in real-life situations. With this in mind, certification is no longer the sole outcome of assessment, and the question of accuracy of measurement and outcomes is overshadowed by the attention needed to be paid to ongoing assessment in support of skill development (Morrisette, 2009).

Some believe that the notion of competency is too multifaceted and lacks theoretical foundations (Dierendonck and Fagnant, 2014; Morrisette and Legendre, 2011; Mottier Lopez and Tessaro, 2010). However, despite its multiple interpretations, and foundations that appear fragile to some, this idea has given rise to the competency-based approach, which has become dominant in most education systems in Europe and North America (Carette and Dupriez, 2009; Dionne, 2014; Gérard, 2013; Lebrun et al., 2004; Monnard and Luisoni, 2013) and is also echoed in Latin America and Africa.

Competency-based assessment presents significant challenges (De Ketele, 2015; Deslandes and Rivard, 2011), particularly at the conceptual level. The transition from a neo-behaviourist to a more constructivist pedagogy continues to be challenging due to the lack of relevant textbooks or inconsistent use of the recommended approach (Lebrun et al., 2004; Mottier Lopez and Tessaro, 2010). In addition, competency-based assessment involves new tools for collecting information about student learning and new, less mechanical, ways of interpreting it, given that more traditional examinations and tests tend to be limited in their capacity to grasp the complexity of these learning goals (Dionne, 2014). Some researchers have expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that little has changed in the way teachers have been assessed since the implementation of objective-based pedagogy (Carette and Dupriez, 2009) or that the knowledge they acquired during their initial training is rarely used in the classroom, to the detriment of experiential knowledge (Nizet, 2016).

There is also a contradiction between the competency-based approach and traditional discipline knowledge (mathematics, humanities, and social sciences, etc.). Some authors (Lebrun et al., 2019; Rayou, 2015) note that the “education for” (citizenship, environment) trend, that is not

always discipline-based, is currently proliferating in schools. This will result in a decline in knowledge of traditional disciplines, reinforced by teachers' emphasis on classroom management (Terrail, 2016). The competency-based approach favours interdisciplinarity and the development of metacognitive strategies. The student's competencies are therefore strengthened in reference to groups of tasks, and not to specific disciplines, which makes the learning-assessment process more complex (Monney and Fontaine, 2016). According to Mangez (2008), the shift toward the competency-based approach would even result in labelling the emphasis on knowledge and its formal mastery as "anti-democratic conservatism."

In line with the first category (see subsection *Formative function of assessment and progression of learning*), this second category concerns studies that propose a sociological analysis of learning assessment from an interactional perspective focused more closely on the actor (Deaudelin et al., 2007; Morrissette, 2009; Mottier Lopez, 2007, 2008; Mottier Lopez and Allal, 2004, 2008; Mottier Lopez et al., 2012). The emphasis is on students, their learning, and the processes they use to learn (Hattie and Timperley, 2007), in short, on their knowing how to act. This approach "leads to the idea that interactions are the driving force behind the regulation of learning, that feedback is constructed and negotiated through class interaction, and that power is redistributed within the classroom community" (Morrissette, 2009, p. 6). The classroom is then analyzed as a microculture (Mottier Lopez, 2008).

According to Morrissette (2010) and Mottier Lopez and Laveault (2008), the valorization of formative assessment and of the actor in the assessment processes has changed the research landscape in this field, because, alongside instrumental approaches, more informal approaches have become central in teacher-student interactions (Morrissette, 2010, 2013). For example, research is being conducted to analyze the motivation and views of students with regard to evaluative activities at school and to document peer or self-assessment. Other research concerns the professional development of teachers, interactional formative assessment strategies, and the regulation of learning. Here, more attention is given to analyzing the discursive and situational practices involved in the negotiation than is entailed by any assessment process (Morrissette, 2010; Mottier Lopez, 2016).

External and standardized assessment and production of “measurable” results

Many of the articles analyzed also connect this “revolution” in education systems, which has taken different forms and met with varying degrees of success depending on the country, to the implementation of mechanisms for quality assurance and school system management, including the development of national standards and external assessments (Brissaud and Lefrançois, 2014; Dierendonck and Fagnant, 2014; Endrizzi and Rey, 2008; Monseur and Demeuse, 2005; Mottier Lopez, 2014; Rocque, 2014; Tochon, 2011). This has led to an increase in the number of external assessment tests (for monitoring students and management of school systems) and their growing impact on educational systems. Such external and standardized assessment is a result of three main phenomena: (a) the continued involvement of a growing number of countries in international student performance surveys; (b) the increased number of external assessments prepared by various educational jurisdictions; and (c) the challenge of assessing the performance of schools and school staff (De Ketele, 2013; Laveault, 2009, 2014).

External and standardized assessment has thus become one of the principal instruments of a new policy of education system regulation (Mons, 2009). While this type of assessment is not a new practice, since the 2000s it has led to a number of scientific and media controversies (Mons, 2009; Monseur and Demeuse, 2005). The trend toward standardized uniform testing poses new challenges, such as linking them with ongoing formative assessment (Fontaine et al., 2013; Monseur and Demeuse, 2005). In fact, the social pressure exerted on teachers encourages them to focus on the objectives assessed in external tests, instead of putting in place formative assessment methods. As a result, testing and examinations define the teaching curriculum, to the detriment of all other aspects, hence the aphorism “teach to the test,” which has acquired an unfortunate significance.

Another controversy concerns the connection between pedagogy and politics:

Whereas in the past, standardized assessment focused on measuring learning was mainly concerned with the student, today its field of intervention is much broader and links pedagogy—its traditional domain—and politics, for which it has become a management tool (Behrens, 2006, quoted in Mons, 2009, p. 5).

In this sense, education data produced by international organizations (e.g., the OECD and the World Bank) are increasingly influencing education policies (Cerqua and Gauthier, 2013). Given this interinfluence, the results of comparative surveys tend to produce concrete and tangible consequences for populations and governments alike (Nóvoa et al., 2014).

Despite the changes in the educational paradigm noted above, it would appear, paradoxically, that external assessment and its standardization are part of the vision of sequential and rational public action by the NPM6 (Mons, 2009). This stems from a top-down or functionalist concept of public action, where policies are implemented by local actors (teachers, school principals) as they are decided in their legal framework. In the formative assessment and competency-based paradigms, students are considered to be the primary actors in their academic success; in the standardized assessment paradigm, the emphasis is on the liability of schools, which see themselves granted a broader range of flexibility. Nevertheless, studies that look at the process implemented by local actors within the framework of standardized assessment indicate that this top-down theoretical vision poses a problem because the actors develop strategies for adapting to institutional injunctions that may not be in line with the expected objectives (Mons, 2009). This echoes Giddens' theory of social structuration (1987), which states that when social actors are subjected to constraints and pressures, they enter into pragmatic agreements to deal with them.

The standardized assessment model is rooted in theories of quantitative measurement, based on an edumetric research paradigm that credits dimensions such as validity and reliability (Lafontaine and Monseur, 2012; Mons, 2009):

- The tests provide a valid measure of student learning and the quality of school instruction.
- This measure is not affected by student differences in motivation, language proficiency, or social or ethnic status. The dimensions could be measured reliably and relatively accurately within an international context.
- School staff, motivated by a system of penalties/rewards, as well as by external review of their work by parents and the public, strive to improve teaching and make use of the resources available to do this.

- Schools can be held accountable for student performance. Parents understand what the tests mean and can interpret their child's and the school's results as a whole.

These assumptions highlight the alleged benefits of standardized assessment, but there is no empirical consensus to attest to this (Mons, 2009; Rozenwajn and Dumay, 2015). Conversely, the positivist, rationalist, and even technocratic epistemology of standardized assessment (Lafontaine and Monseur, 2012), often used to draw attention to criteria considered objective, raises various criticisms (Lamont, 2012). On the methodological level, assertions about accuracy and the ability to eliminate any arbitrariness from assessment methods are questioned: What is the difference between fact and opinion? Between what is proven and what the evidence suggests (LeBreton, 2012)?

The promoters of these standardized assessments attempt to establish their legitimacy by making the applied assessment criteria visible and explicit, whether or not they are aware of their arbitrary nature (Lamont, 2012). Belhoste (2002) questions the legitimacy of the tests and results, which depend on several factors, such as the authority of the examiners and how they are appointed; the validity of the knowledge and skills being assessed; and the reliability of the corrections and judgments. According to this author, the study of testing illustrates what makes the history of education interesting but also difficult: teaching-learning processes are fundamental realities of life in society, while testing and standardized assessment are social constructs.

The studies referenced in this category, which presents analyses related to NPM and standardized assessment, are in a different sociological category than has been addressed by the literature in this field. The sociological focus of these studies is quite different, in that it assesses not only students, but also educational systems and institutions, as well as modes of governance.

Assessment as the manifestation of norms of excellence and the democratization of schooling success

A number of the studies we reviewed share a common thread: they highlight how learning assessment embodies what Perrenoud (1995) calls “norms of excellence,” bringing into play the democratization of schooling success. According to Perrenoud, these norms are variously interpreted and applied to all learners through (in)formal assessment procedures and

practices. The manifestations of norms of excellence can be identified through the outcomes of the assessment process, such as grades and numerical results in school reports or the ranking and hierarchization of students.

The issue of using numerical grades in assessment has generated considerable controversy in the French-speaking world, particularly in Quebec, Switzerland, and Belgium (Endrizzi and Rey, 2008; Mottier Lopez, 2014). The demands of parents, accustomed to grades on report cards, which they consider more “objective” (Morrissette and Legendre, 2011), are often at the root of these controversies, which Perrenoud decries (2001):

We are still driven by an archaic model of assessment, obsessed by formal standards of fairness rather than by the relevance of the judgment. In the minds of pupils, parents, students and even teachers, it is better to have a multiple-choice test, which does not measure anything essential but seems more “objective” than the judgment of a competent and experienced professional, which is automatically considered “subjective.” (p. 2)

The relationship between grades and the possible impact on students’ self-esteem and motivation was also addressed in several of the articles reviewed. Bourque et al. (2014) propose that school grades cannot have a negative impact on students’ self-esteem because research conducted since the 2000s establishes that this relationship is unconvincing and inconsistent (Marsh and O’Mara, 2008, quoted in Bourque et al., 2014). On the other hand, Merle (2014) argues that marking is said to have the virtue of fostering (healthy) rivalry and competition between students, which is essential to their motivation. However, he believes that this debate is largely self-evident: what is experienced personally is assimilated into a shared situation. This discussion is said to be held and disseminated by graduates and by those who were good students and who did well on school tests. Again, according to Merle (2014), believing that grades encourage students implies a lack of awareness of the current appalling school dropout rate. Simply put, norms of excellence encourage good students and discourage the rest. Moreover, even for the best students, the overall effect of grades is not necessarily positive, since competition encourages individualism and antisocial behaviour (Merle, 2014). This point of view suggests that the essential element is no longer to learn, understand, or be passionate about your education, but to be at the top of your class. This is in line with the view of Gérard (2013), who posits that the prominence of numerical

assessment is so great that it seems to distract students from the real goals of learning. Students just want to get an average grade and pass their exams so that they can get into the next grade.

The controversy over numerical grades often translates into a debate between equal opportunity and meritocracy. For Jeffrey (2013), there is no single explanation for the fear of academic excellence. It would be appropriate to ask whether this fear stems from a misunderstanding of equal opportunity in school, as not all students are capable of the same performance in all learning activities. Thus, “giving everyone the same opportunity to succeed in school should not lead to ceasing to recognize merit and excellence based on common standards for all students at the same level” (Jeffrey, 2013, p. 51). In this sense, excellence does not stand in the way of equal opportunity, because the school system can encourage all students to succeed and support those having difficulty. However, this would require accepting the fact that some students are more successful than others in certain areas of learning: “This does not disqualify those who are less successful, as long as we do not use excellence to classify students” (Jeffrey, 2013, p. 55). For Perrenoud, (1989), norms of excellence and the basis of judgements are conflicting issues, because excellence is assessed according to an implicit or explicit standard defined by the assessor. Thus, the norms of excellence would be applied to learners during assessment practices based on an interpretation made by the assessor. According to Perrenoud, the arbitrariness of assessment is therefore constantly open to being (re)discovered and challenged by those involved.

In today’s educational landscape, which encompasses equal opportunity and meritocracy, it would seem that teachers, dominant groups, and good students frequently place a higher priority on merit, while dominated groups and less successful students choose equality (Cogérino and Mnaffakh, 2008). Following Dubet (2000, quoted in Cogérino and Mnaffakh, 2008); we note that “the more the school becomes democratic, the more it strives to attain the conditions for equal opportunity and the more it increases the contradictions between equality and merit. The democratic school is also meritocratic: supposedly equal individuals are in constant competition” (p. 114).

To satisfy the performance imperatives of the system, students lose the means necessary to create their own identity, since they are bound by a model of existence imposed by an outside organization (Bourque et al.,

2014). Learning assessments thus risk putting students in a situation they do not understand and in which they do not want to engage (Cardinet and Laveault, 2001). This then becomes a threat to the future of the system, by narrowing the focus of the curriculum. As a result, the development of a humanistic education that promotes individuality and creativity is limited. Since the middle of the 20th century, public schools have tried to find a balance between a discourse in favour of equal opportunities and equity and justice in training systems on the one hand and commitment to selective and discriminating structures on the other (Gilliéron Giroud and Tessaro, 2009).

The articles reviewed in this category pose a challenge for the sociological analysis of public policies based on an examination of the sources of legitimacy of the processes, including the assessment processes and the evaluators. Here, the analyses situate the democratic school in a real market context. According to De Ketele (2013), rankings promote competitiveness and reduce education to a segment of the school market, to a “commodity” like any other, thus fostering social divisions and educational inequalities. This shift is part of the broader trend of globalization, which has affected the world’s economies and significantly influenced education since the late 20th century (Rayou, 2015). In these “knowledge economies,” education is seen as a means by which skilled individuals can boost their earnings to satisfy individual and societal needs, including economic growth (Hanhart, 2019). It may thus risk contributing to a model of personal development centred on having rather than on being (De Ketele, 2013).

Conclusion

In this last section, we wish to discuss the second objective of this article, i.e., identifying current research perspectives and research questions in the sociology of classroom assessment related to student and teacher issues, as well as the current context of the pressure to assess.

Taking a step back from the dialogue we have established between the articles studied and other authors mentioned, we note that, up to now, subjects that concern classroom assessment have been explored primarily by a critical sociology. The ideas of Merle, Perrenoud, and others have acted as a guardrail for a science that may be blind to a groundswell of postulates and movements (e.g., NPM), and which understandably arouses a great

deal of enthusiasm among researchers in assessment, who see in it new possibilities for work. Given that they rely heavily on statistics, this era of valuing and measuring numbers clearly represents an opportunity for them.

The dialogue between sociology and assessment has to date created a kind of historical pairing that has shaped their respective evolution, sustained their dynamism, and preserved their richness because it has not caused excessive asymmetries. In highlighting the critical issues related to assessment practices, we did not resolve the debates but revived them in the form of controversies, rather than disqualifications, which we believe is a sign of scientific vitality. If researchers in the field of assessment referred to authors affiliated with sociology, it is reasonable to think that in the absence of an organized sociology of assessment, they had to seek external support for their work, which differed from the usual work in the field. And if this work has so far remained somewhat on the sidelines, being neither interrelated nor organized into a specific scientific project, a jurisdictional struggle may be involved. According to Abbott (1988), members of a professional community seek to control their boundaries by establishing alliances and by legitimizing and validating specialized knowledge in the social field in order to maintain a monopoly on achievement in their work, i.e., “jurisdiction.” From this perspective, the use of outside work can seem threatening to a symbolic territory, as specialized knowledge constitutes the benchmarks that enable members of a professional community to define and sustain themselves as a group. However, we argue that respecting the boundaries between the fields of assessment and sociology would be counterproductive, as both benefit from cross-fertilization, which is what scientific activity is all about.

For example, many epistemological debates have already borne fruit: critical sociology has highlighted the arbitrariness of assessment standards. The debates on the consequences of the current environment have also shed light on what has been a blind spot of some researchers in the field of evaluation; the social issues we noted, resulting from possible “unintended consequences of action” (Giddens, 1987) must be taken into account.

In the first category of issues, we have shown, for example, that formative assessment is playing an increasingly important role in the discourse and policies of French-speaking countries, but that it may still be perceived by students and their parents as not “counting.” It may also be devalued in certain social groups.

In the second category, the studies explain that the competency-based approach proposes new ways of interpreting assessment that are less mechanical, but, in practice, teacher assessment methods have hardly changed since the emergence of teaching by objectives.

In the third category, we discussed standardized assessments and their arbitrariness. The legitimacy of assessments is questioned, as it depends largely on several factors, such as the authority of the examiners and how they are appointed.

Finally, in the last category of issues, the articles analyzed reveal an educational landscape defined in terms of equal opportunity and meritocracy, with certain groups of actors preferring one over the other.

Nonetheless, this critical trend has so far emerged as more of a theoretical sociology. As we continue to tap into it, we believe that future research prospects will be in line with the comprehensive sociology of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). Mead's approach is empirically grounded and focuses on issues that are attentive to the universe of meanings to which the actors refer and therefore to the logic underlying their actions (Morrisette et al., 2011). Such a sociology would make it possible to grasp the experiences of different groups of social actors, involved from near or far and from different perspectives, in the assessment processes that are particularly important in today's environment.

The significance of this comprehensive sociology also lies in the renewal of research methodologies that it would generate in the field of assessment. It would encourage less common approaches, allowing for a renewed focus on dynamic social subjects. For example, ethnographies that emphasize direct observation, within open and non-codified approaches, could help bring new, presently lacking, perspectives to current issues in the field of assessment. In addition, biographical accounts, which give privileged access to the interpretative models of the actors concerned, would enable us to appraise how evaluative practices shape student trajectories. Similarly, comprehensive interviews combined with situation analysis would make it possible to examine how the interdependence of the actors' positions in the classroom is negotiated during the "assessment activity." In short, alongside a critical and theoretical sociology, a comprehensive sociology that values fieldwork would contribute to the methodological diversification that could nurture future research.

Limitations

Our analysis of the literature does, of course, have certain limitations that should be noted. For example, by excluding articles that do not directly concern learning assessment, we are clearly adopting a narrower view of the interrelationships of teaching/learning/assessment processes. Furthermore, our literature review was not meant to be exhaustive, but on the contrary was designed to leave space for our own judgements. For this reason, some of the relevant research that deals with the sociological issues of classroom assessment may have been left out.

Despite these limitations, this research has allowed us to better understand the possibilities of the sociology of classroom assessment through a discussion of studies in French. We have thus helped to formalize the field, while highlighting various sociological issues that characterize classroom assessment practices.

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NOTES

1. Of the 46 articles, 4 were not published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.
2. The 13 rejected articles were less relevant to the analysis. For example, they dealt with very specific issues, such as the analysis of a single evaluation tool. We also set aside theses and dissertations, because the important contributions included in this type of work are often published in scientific articles.
3. The 59 articles in the corpus are identified by an asterisk (*) in the list of references.
4. These are additional articles identified by two asterisks (**) in the list of references. These articles are not part of the initial corpus, but they were used to complement the analysis of the results.
5. These categories are not exclusive, and the complexity of assessment issues means that some authors move back and forth between them.
6. According to Maroy (2017), the NPM doctrine has been translated in several countries into policies of accountability and reporting of schools and teachers based on their performance. These systems generally include four elements: (a) standards, i.e., what students should learn; (b) a system of external assessment of student achievement; (c) public reporting of test scores; and (d) holding schools accountable for their results.

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