

Article

“Otherwise, There Would Be No Point in Going to School”: Children’s Views on Assessment

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Abstract: Assessment is a much-discussed dimension of school life, as it is deeply connected to teacher–student power relations, where teachers’ responsibilities for individual assessment and support coexist. Moreover, children’s views are hardly investigated in the research. Studies reflecting those aspects in inclusive school systems, such as the Italian one, are still rare. Assuming assessment is a social practice that shapes classroom differences, in our research project on “Children’s Perceptions of Performance in Primary Schools” (CrisP), we conducted 35 narrative interviews with 3rd graders from six schools, framed by classroom observations, to reconstruct their perceptions of performance and assessment and develop individual case portraits through Open Coding as defined within Grounded Theory and the Documentary Method. The study was conducted in the Province of Bolzano (Italy). Children seem aware of the teacher–child power relations that emerge in the assessment field and the reciprocity and interdependence of the two roles. In the reconstruction of Alice’s case, she demonstrates she trusts adults but can also work pragmatically on her position, redefining her power role that benefits from teachers’ services. Along with a brief overview of crucial findings and the reconstruction of Alice’s perceptions, we ask for implications for appropriate assessment practices in inclusive primary schools.

Keywords: assessment; primary school; inclusion; power relations; childhood studies; teachers’ professionalisation



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1. Introduction

Since formal education in schools is “public” to classmates and teachers, it depends on visibility; teaching and learning practices in schools are inevitably connected with aspects of reporting and learning, and so, with the concepts of achievement and assessment. In this frame, social practices of assessment are profoundly affected by the institutionally framed and interactionally shaped different roles of teachers and students that can manifest at the classroom level in very different ways [1].

Related to stratified systems, the achievement is often understood as a regulation of individual educational pathways via assessment [2,3], following a meritocratic line of thinking. The latter emphasises the responsibility of individuals for their academic success while presuming neutrality of evaluation as far as going with elaborated diagnostic competencies of teachers [4]. On the other side, assessment is referred to as a professional practice of teachers mainly linked with power and responsibility [5]. It is characterised by institutionally given antinomies [6], such as the promotion and support of children within pedagogical relations on the one hand and the request to assess and judge them at the same time [7].

Considering the classroom as a complex social system, assessment is assumed here as a communicative and dynamic practice which is defined by mutual (role) expectations, but in which learning, which is therefore fundamentally marked by contingency, must be expected on all sides [8,9].

This general assumption is particularly significant, as several studies on an international level show that assessment underlies complex habitus-led dynamics and is closely linked to the reproduction and reinforcement of educational inequity via schooling [10,11]. Viewed in reverse, reducing educational inequity as a goal is closely associated with establishing and expanding inclusive educational systems [12–14]. In this context, inclusive education is partly seen as contrasted with meritocratic principles [15], and it is asked for potential-orientated approaches to individual achievement under the presumption of diversity and equity in inclusive classrooms [16–18]. It is thus remarkable that, so far, there has been little research on appropriate assessment strategies in inclusive classrooms [19,20]. It is also noticeable that existing studies on assessment at the primary school level mainly focus on teachers' practices rather than children's views of assessment [21].

Contributing to this desideratum of research, in our study on "Children's Perceptions of Performance in Primary Schools" (CrisP), we reconstructed primary school children's perceptions of performance, achievement, and assessment in the frame of the inclusively structured Italian school system. As indicated above, we assume that assessment is a social practice between teachers (adults) and students (children), and social differences among children are shaped in the classroom via the diversity of learning processes. Our interest in the topic is reinforced by the goal of understanding more deeply how descriptive reporting standards (implemented in Italy since 2020) [22] are recontextualised and translated into specific social practices in (inclusive) primary schools and how children perceive them.

In the following, the theoretical framework of our study is briefly outlined before we give a short overview of crucial findings and then discuss in depth the reconstruction of an eight-year-old pupil's perceptions of assessment and achievement. The insights and analyses get discussed under the question of what roles and power relations are negotiated in assessment practices and how children "play the game of power" at school. From here, we finally ask for implications for teachers' education in that context.

2. Assessment in Primary School: Theoretical Frame and State of the Art

Assessment is discussed differently in different countries on the level of practice and scientific discourses as conceptions that constitute social reality in schools as institutions are framed by specific regulative, normative, and cultural cognitive elements [23]. Although international agendas such as a growing output orientation around the OECD large-scale assessment studies [24] and the 2030 agenda on sustainability [14] partially overlap with the national ones, they are partly different. In the case of assessment, the diverging tracking structures within educational systems are particularly significant for that.

2.1. The International Perspective

In countries that carry out early selection, summative assessment and numerical grading are more common [2,25,26] and are often associated with a meritocratic orientation. At the same time, this is exposed to significant criticism from the academic side [20,27], namely the attribution of educational inequity via (under)achievement to the individual [28] and thus ignoring the diversity of living conditions. Since children benefit differently from school education depending on their living environment, grading based on summative assessment could be considered institutional discrimination [28].

Decades ago, research showed clearly that numerical grades do not meet the intended requirements of objectivity, reliability, and validity [29,30]. Research-based critiques of grading also point out the failure to consider individual socio-cultural conditions [31] by pretending to be objective but being primarily oriented towards habitual patterns [32–35]. This way, they contribute to reproducing and reinforcing educational inequities [36].

For inclusive school systems, where the diversity of learning is structurally anchored in the school system's mission, assessment aims to focus on the process and the promotion of learning and dialogue rather than on tracking. This is why some newer approaches focus on authenticity and trustworthiness as criteria to assess quality to document the achievement and practices of assessment [37,38]. Recognising, describing, and documenting

learning processes, and considering each learner's prerequisites and learning conditions, are named regularly as crucial aspects of the role of the teachers within inclusive educational systems [39]. In this context, Prenzel [40] proposes a reinterpretation of the three reference norms of assessment (i.e., 1 the individual, 2 the social, and 3 the criteria reference norm [41]) as a multi-perspective recognition of learning achievements. Based on an (1) egalitarian-universal reference norm, which ensures recognition of every child's human dignity, the (2) individual-critical reference norm directs attention to the learning and developmental steps of the individual, whereby the (3) social-comparative reference norm is linked to solidarity and interpersonal recognition [40] (p. 15), [42,43].

Summarising, within the discourse on (inclusive) primary schooling, the main function of assessment is in consensus seen as a formative type of assessment *for* learning, respectively assessment *as* learning [27], aimed at understanding how each child's learning occurs, to design meaningful and stimulating learning experiences that support students in the acquisition of knowledge and the development of (obviously diverging) skills and competences [44]. That is negotiated as child-oriented and gets polarised from simply reporting the result of performance in a summative sense and according to standards, coded by a number in the acceptance of learning assessment [45].

Practised documentation, feedback, and assessment forms are thus highly significant for the didactic teaching design [46]. Conversely, teaching strategies oriented towards learning diversity depend on appropriate forms of documentation and assessment [47] (p. 41), [20,48]. In this regard, the Italian context is particularly interesting as the education system does not track the transition from primary to lower secondary school since the 1960s and has been inclusive since the 1970s [49].

2.2. The Italian School System and Assessment at the Primary School

In Italy, the primary school covers five years and follows three years of kindergarten, fully integrated (but not compulsory) into the education system. After primary school, a three-year lower secondary school succeeds, which is also part of the foundational education [50], followed by a mandatory similar two-year upper-secondary school period. There is no special school system. Instead, since 1977, every child has the unrestricted right to at least ten years of (inclusive) compulsory school education. In addition to compulsory schooling, there is mandatory education up to 18, realised through completion of secondary school, vocational training, adult education, or apprenticeship. In the case of certified special educational needs, the child has the right to an Individual Education Plan (IEP) (*Piano Educativo Individualizzato* [PEI] and *Piano Didattico Personalizzato* [PDP]) to ensure curricular participation [51].

The Italian school assessment system and its rules have often changed in relation to shifting educational policies. When the institutional frame of five-year primary school, without any tracking, was built up in the 1960ies, report cards with numerical marks (the so-called *pagelle*) were still in use. In 1977, they were abolished in favour of personal cards (i.e., *schede personali*) and descriptive-analytical judgments linked with the nationwide obligate for inclusive education. The general Italian school system framework asserting the right to education for all within a single classroom has produced challenges for teacher education, especially when managing "diversity" at a pedagogical and didactic level. It has raised the question of appropriate assessment strategies.

Numerical grading was reintroduced in 2008 in line with the increasing importance of large-scale international assessments critically [52] and was aligned with a growing orientation of educational systems on outputs. Later, more attention was paid to types of competence-oriented learning documentation, and debates on educational equity intensified [53].

In 2020, a new type of assessment became normative, and feedback had to be provided in a descriptive form in primary schools [22,54]. The new norm made it obligatory for teachers to use report cards to report on their pupils' achievements. Indeed, the periodic and final learning assessment had also to be reported on formative perspective documents

through descriptive narrative “judgements” [22]. In the current literature, this change is often described as better meeting the objectives of inclusion and the teaching practices that enable their implementation [55].

Based on this, the inclusion mandate in primary schools, structurally and firmly anchored in Italy, is highly significant in achievement and assessment, as achievement ‘emerges’ in the interactions between students and teachers [56,57]. However, assessment is dependent on structural orders and professional demands on teachers [58,59].

2.3. Childhood Studies

Assessment in the classroom is a social practice determined by norms and conventions among the participants [60] (p. 28). Concerning the intergenerational structuring of primary school as an institution [61], in which these processes take place between children and adults, the children’s perspectives are of exceptionally high relevance, which is why they form the object of research here.

By eliciting children’s voices, the study ties in with the paradigm of Childhood Studies, which sees children as experts and key informants of their lives [62–64]. The understanding of children as subjects who are capable of providing information about their lifeworld has led to intense debates in childhood research about methodological challenges [65–68]. Internationally, children’s school experience is becoming increasingly a focus of childhood research, strengthened by the findings of the Children’s Worlds Survey on their well-being at school [69] (p. 67). In addition, school development studies increasingly address children’s views [70,71]. Instead, aspects around achievement and assessment through approaching children’s perspectives have hardly been addressed [72–77]; for a summary see [21].

Based on this insight, the institutional boundaries determining the children’s primary school actions must be considered [78]. In addition, different case studies highlight that children are oriented towards pragmatics and efficiency in individualised learning in primary school [79]. It is especially the case as assessment is undoubtedly a potent instrument of school as an institution, and the institutionally prescribed intergenerational relationships between children and adults cannot be completely dissolved [61,80]. In this regard, assessment is a particularly relevant dimension of classroom practice. Notoriously, assessment practices exert power over students’ behaviour and how they feel as individuals [81] (p. 315).

It implies the limitation that relevant research findings mainly show how adults understand children’s voices and embed them in an adult-led academic discourse. We framed our study on these assumptions and approaches. Specifically, the research design and methodologies are described in the following section.

3. Methodological Design: Children’s Voices on Assessment

Overall, the study is definable as reconstructive qualitative social research [82], which gathers more detailed knowledge on the assessment by starting from children’s perspectives on and understanding of the topic.

Focusing on the children’s narrations, we can capture their views on assessment as a social practice and discuss them regarding the imbalances highlighted above [83]. Hence, we used a micro-sociological approach as the basis for a subject-centred perspective through which children’s orientations are reconstructed [68], seeing children’s conceptions of assessment, shaped through experience, as socio-cultural products [84] (p. 3).

In detail, our research questions are:

- What are children’s perceptions of assessment practices and results? What factors affect these perceptions?
- How do assessment practices contribute to generating power relations in inclusive schools? How do children deal with them?
- How do assessment practices contribute to shaping classroom differences in inclusive primary schools?

- How do the new Italian descriptive standards translate into specific social practices, and how do children perceive them?
- What implications can be highlighted for teacher education in this context?

The study was conducted in the Province of Bolzano. This Northern Italian region is characterised by a specific ethnolinguistic context (i.e., three languages, namely German, Italian, and Ladin, share the status of official language). In terms of methods of data collection, 35 narrative interviews [85] with third graders (20 children aged 8, 15 children aged 9; 16 female and 19 male) from six primary schools were conducted (18 in Italian and 17 in German). In order to address the children as children and not only as students, the interview situation and the interviewee allowed the children at any time to switch to the German dialect, the language most children use within and outside the school context in formal and informal situations (e.g., during the break, when discussing things with each other). Parents' consent for their children's participation was asked in a written form, while children were asked for their (ongoing) assent verbally after explaining the study in the age-appropriate language [86,87]. Further, to contextualise the interviews [88], classroom observations have been carried out. Theoretical sampling, as defined within Grounded Theory, has been applied, namely following the idea of a minimal and maximal contrasting [89], and based on the classroom observations, which also functioned as opportunities for the children to get to know the researchers. More precisely, the sample was contrastively composed according to achievement level (three children had an IEP and two children were considered high-achieving) and cultural-linguistic diversity (seven children with migration experience).

This way, the classroom observations served the dual function of situating the children's reflections in the educational and didactical context (structured by an observation sheet) and the sampling strategy described. The interviews took place in Italian and German according to children's choices during the school day in a quiet room familiar to the children and one child at a time. The interviews had an average duration of 20–25 min, with a few exceptions of shorter (about 15 min) or longer (about 35 min) length. In the initial phase, the confidentiality of what was said and the anonymization of sensitive data were explained to the child, who was then asked for their consent for the interview. Then, nine open questions encouraging free narration followed, partly using images to inspire narratives about their own experiences. The questions were organized into the areas of achievement and performance, assessment and feedback, the teacher's role, and report cards. The interviewer flexibly adapted the order of the questions to the child's narratives and thus followed their natural narrative flow.

To avoid the loss of any relevant information faced with the reality of bilingual data Open Coding, as defined within Grounded Theory [90], was used to structure the data and analyse data thematically. Interviews were transcribed in the original language, but the coding was conducted in English and reciprocally within the research team to prepare for the formation of the main categories, which is not the focus of this paper, and to allow the researchers to get an overview of thematic turns and to select dense sequences for reconstruction, which have been analysed in depth through the Documentary Method [85,91]. The method referred to the methodology of the Sociology of Knowledge in the tradition of Karl Mannheim [92] and asked for a praxeological understanding that action-guiding orientations are documented in what is said [91] or is underlined. That makes it possible to reconstruct the implicit meaning structures. Within the present contribution, we will focus on an individual case portrait developed through reconstructing one child's perceptions.

A special feature of the interviews that deserves further elaboration is the visual material used therein in the second half of the interview. Images (Figure 1) were created for the interviews on possible assessment practices: teacher–class group interaction (Image 1), oral examination (Image 2), workgroup (Image 3), teacher–student interaction (Image 4), written examination (Image 5), individual presentation (Image 6), role-playing (Image 7), and group presentation (Image 8). Images were selected based on the literature and short piloting interviews with primary school teachers. Using a minimalistic design, it aimed to

stimulate children's narration close to their reception practices [93,94], as pictures play a crucial role in children's everyday life experiences [95]. However, space was always given for children's interpretations of the images. In detail, during the interview, the children were asked to describe the images, if they had ever found themselves in those situations, and to choose the ones they experienced. They were also allowed to narrate and draw the emotion they felt in these situations into the empty face.

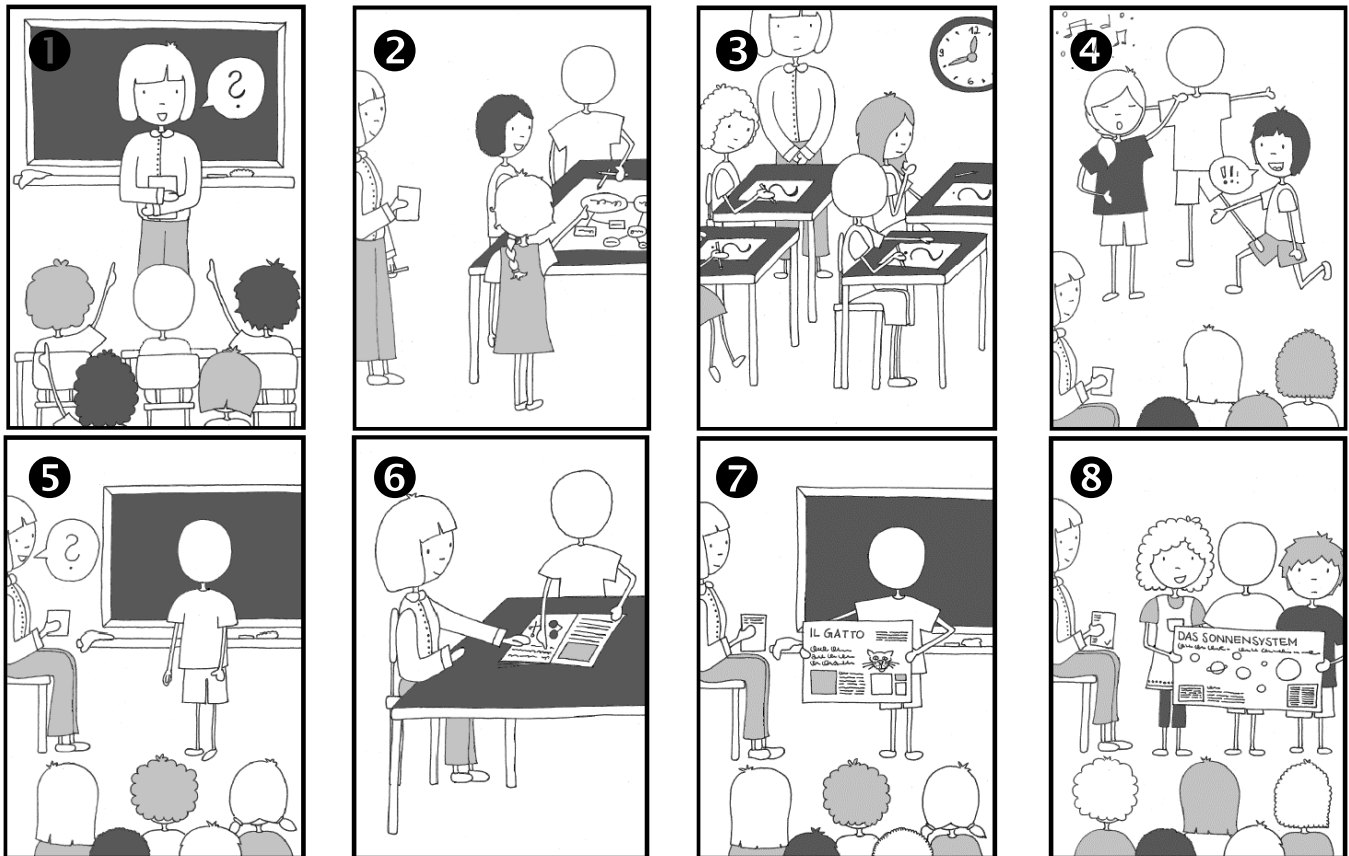


Figure 1. Images used in the narrative interviews (© Author 3): (1) teacher–class group interaction; (2) oral examination; (3) workgroup; (4) teacher–student interaction; (5) written examination; (6) individual presentation; (7) role playing; (8) group presentation.

4. Children's Views on Assessment

Our analyses lead to the initial general hypothesis that the children's perspectives on assessment practices are driven by specific reflections on children's and adults' role expectations, hidden rules, and relationships among fairness, equity, and power within primary school life, as will be explained in more detail below.

4.1. Findings

Before the reconstruction of the exemplary case, an overall summary of the findings will be illustrated by anchoring the case within the whole data set. Doing so will focus on those thematic areas relevant to the present contribution.

Across the interviews, by describing experiences and reflections, children provided narrations that allowed them to reconstruct their orientations on achievement and assessment in primary school. Overall, children frequently reflect on assessment practices within the frame of pedagogical relationships, that is, between adults (teachers) and children (students). In doing so, on the one hand, they express the high importance of pedagogical relationships, their recognition, and the emotions related to these. On the other hand, they specifically reflect on children's and adults' (institutionally given) social roles and

the linked expectations placed on them. Sometimes, they also express their discontent about restricted participation options, such as Alexia: “Nothing can be done in this school, practically the teachers always decide” (Tulip_transcript_06, Pos. 130). They are also addressing and reflecting on antinomies related to teachers’ professionalism, such as when Hermione explains: “[...] they don’t give us [homework] to annoy us, ... I will not say to ruin us. ... or to keep us busy on Saturday and Sunday, but they do it so that we learn [...]” (Daffodil_transcript_15, Pos. 121). This way, they address role expectations and habitual rules within the school institution and develop individual strategies to act within their role as students and pedagogical relationships. The children also express in that context that it is helpful for them to know about teachers’ expectations of “good” and “bad” students and to have linked strategies to show/present themselves as “good” students.

Further, children distinguish between learning processes and the class public showing of learning, which happens especially when applying summative assessment. In this regard, Rosso, for example, explains how tests serve the purpose “[...] to get better and better, because otherwise there would be no point in going to school”. (Daffodil_transcript_22, Pos. 145). It can be read as children’s clear awareness of the critical position of assessment in school as an institution and how assessment about learning in school is dominant. They express the high importance of demonstrating learning in the sense of performance, meaning the children perceive assessment as a social practice. Some children also show that demonstrated effort is a crucial part of the performance as it refers to teachers’ expectations towards children. It allows them to acknowledge learning partly independently from countable results.

Instead, the classroom observations led to the overall hypothesis that the children’s reflections on achievement and assessment link with the (observed) pedagogical–didactical settings and teaching styles. They also connect with the diverging roles of teachers in these contexts. In some classes, children describe a very high grade of participation in terms of being able to organise their learning independently (i.e., free choice of discipline, tasks, and working form) and teachers taking on the role of a “learning coach” who gave feedback or helped with orientation, structuring, and scheduling of the child’s learning, such as in the narrations of Lucky who takes part of a mixed-age class: “... then they say, ‘you could do this’ or ‘maybe these other things rather not’.” (Dahlia_transcript_2, Pos. 72). In these cases, roles between children and adults are more fluent: “Today I was like a teacher. There is a girl from class four, I’m still from class three [...] and she hasn’t done the multiplication sheet yet and I showed her how to do it” (Dahlia_transcript_2, Pos. 110).

In the related classroom observations, we found a teaching style that was more associated with open structures and opportunities for self-regulated student learning, where the assessment was primarily used as an integral part of the learning processes and was also identified, by the children, as a moment in which learning itself could be made visible (e.g., individual or group presentation of a project).

In summary, children actively shape the pedagogical–didactic working alliance [96,97] by perceiving and interpreting role expectations of them in class and actively shaping their roles about it. In addition, the children describe in their narrations how they position themselves in a role-flexible manner within different working alliances or “didactical contracts” with different teachers (if teachers change during the school day) and profile themselves specifically habitually. In other words, in the children’s narratives, the “work” on the student habitus as a framework of orientation is evident across the board concerning achievement and assessment, but in divergent ways within differently designed pedagogical working alliances and didactical approaches. In this context, the didactic orientation to diversity vs standardisation of learning goals, on the one hand, and the diverging perceived participation opportunities in the sense of children’s co-determination, on the other hand, are important intersections.

In the following, we will look more into Alice’s narratives reconstructing her everyday practice and the experiential knowledge constitutive for this practice [82].

4.2. Children's Perceptions of Assessment—The Case of Alice

Hereafter, we discuss the case of one child in depth by giving insights into the reconstructions of Alice's narrations in the assessment context. Five short sequences from the interview are reconstructed.

Interviewer: [...] How do your teachers know if you have learnt anything?

Alice: Because I often raise my hand, uhm, then they understand that I ... being a child ... because I am also a bit shy.

Interviewer: Ahh

Alice: However, because I know them, and-and I confide in them, I often raise my hand because they put things into my head well.

[...]

Interviewer: M-m (nodding), and do you talk to them about your learning?

Alice: Actually, I discuss a lot with my teachers because, if mum is not present, it is like they are, ehm. . . my babysitters.

Interviewer: M-m (nodding)

Alice: Because they make me learn, eh. . . kind of, like mum.

(Daffodil_transcript_16, Pos. 39–42; 47–50)

Alice introduces the topic by referring to the performance of learning in public in the classroom. She mentions the practice of raising hands and connects it to the role expectations for children at school in further elaborating on the topic. Even if a child is shy, raising their hand, according to her explanation, is a way of displaying learning in the role of the pupil in a way that teachers can understand and interpret. Raising the hand is further linked to trust. (Only) Trust and familiarity with teachers make it possible to show learning. The sub-theme of the pedagogical relationship and trust is ratified here as being based on professionalism because the teacher, following the description, succeeds in putting things into the children's heads, which could be read as a technological description, but also as one that cannot be grasped in detail and is beyond one's understanding.

Then, the sub-theme of the pedagogical relationship is further differentiated based on the relationship of trust with the teacher. When the mother is absent, the teachers are the contact persons for reflections on one's learning. Their role in this context is described as a babysitter, which goes hand in hand with the fact that they temporarily replace the educating family member. According to the description, they have this role because they succeed in inducing learning in Alice, comparable to a mother.

In summary, learning is closely related to its (public) performance and can be clearly understood regarding the institutional roles of children and adults in the classroom. However, at the level of pedagogical relations, formal and informal learning are closely linked, and the spheres of school and family are not separate.

In the further course of the interview, the interviewer asks Alice more about the teacher's feedback.

Interviewer: How do you use it? [Feedback]

Alice: I use it either when I do something wrong, which I then learn, because, um ... I, when I am told that something is wrong, I, I agree, because I am not the teacher, I am a child, a pupil trying to learn, and so I let them, I let them tell me when I make mistakes.

(Daffodil_transcript_16, Pos. 159–160)

When asked about using feedback, Alice first refers to the word "wrong". Following this proposition of the topic, feedback is helpful in the case of mistakes or something that needs to be done appropriately. If she uses feedback for things that she did wrong, she learns these things. Thus, Alice connotes feedback as conducive to learning in these cases. Although she begins her proposition with an "either clause" (referring to something done wrong), the "or clause" does not follow.

In this way, the following elaboration of the theme, which refers to her role as a child and student and the complementing role of her teacher, is concluded with the description that she lets the teacher point out mistakes to her. She remains in the first-person perspective in this elaboration of the topic. In doing so, she assigns complementary roles to herself and the teacher, which she explicitly names: “I am a child, a pupil trying to learn”. Afterwards, she further emphasises that it is part of her role to allow the teacher to point out her mistakes, and thus, she ratifies the pattern of roles and linked tasks and competencies. Through the feedback from her teacher, she explains, she learns as she gets clear information about what has been done wrong. She continues this description by explaining that she accepts feedback on her mistakes because it is part of her role as a student, as a willing-to-learn child; her role can thus be contrasted with the teacher.

Following Alice’s descriptions, any feedback is linked to learning and awareness of mistakes. Consequently, the learning process depends on someone making learners aware of mistakes. Doing things wrong is part of the learning process, not something to be hidden but an integral part of learning. Therefore, according to Alice, teachers’ and children’s complementary roles at school enable the latter to learn. By sticking to the description of the reaction to mistakes, the elaboration process or clues and hints that could be derived from correct products remain unspoken. More generally, this leads to the impression that Alice experiences learning as characterised by working towards correct solutions rather than an idea of learning as an open, explorative process.

During the interview, Alice repeatedly declares that she accepts her role as a child trying to learn and appears to feel comfortable with different role expectations and role-congruent actions.

Interviewer: [. . .] Why do you think teachers give you feedback?

Alice: Because to me, children have to learn, yes, and in my opinion, they [the teachers] do those activities for . . . for . . . [. . .], to make children try to, to learn because not everything we do is right. . . To put this into our heads

Interviewer: M-m (nodding)

Alice: Eh, and yet, when we try hard, things are often correct. When we try to study our best, we can do the tests, uhm, or when we do not try to commit ourselves.

Interviewer: M-m (nodding)

Alice: So, it is natural that the teachers perceive that we do not commit or do commit.

(Daffodil_transcript_16, Pos. 167–174)

When asked about the perceived reasons for assessment practices, Alice refers again to social role expectations and the intergenerational difference between children, who must learn, and adults, who should act if children do wrong in the learning process. Then it is up to them to make children understand that mistakes are part of the learning process. She uses here the same slightly technological-sounding formulation that this assumption has to be put into children’s heads by teachers. At the same time, she elaborates on the concept of trying and failing as significant and integral dimensions of learning processes and the relevance of reflecting these aspects. Further, she introduces the notion of commitment in terms of effort and combines it with the relevance of its visibility.

Making efforts is a strategy that enables children to do things right and is crucial for learning processes. At the same time, it can be seen by adults because it is something visible. It has its starting point in assessment with feedback considering assessment practices force children to learn and make sense of it. Since assessment makes the effort of learning visible, the latter occurs mainly through exams.

Alice: [. . .] if they see that in those two days, in that week we have committed to homework or studying, mm, they go for a test.

Interviewer: Okay.

Alice: However, this is not out of malice [...] but because they see that we have not committed ourselves.

(Daffodil_transcript_16, Pos. 180–184)

In the conclusion of the topic, Alice reflects on the indications of exams and the teachers' motivations for them. Since she is part of the pedagogical relationship, it seems impossible for her to criticise, but she can only act loyal. She touches on the antinomy emerging in teachers' professional roles. Teachers possess both a controlling and a supportive position for constructing the pedagogical relationship. Hence, Alice believes written examinations are necessary when children need to put more effort into learning. Following her description, written assignments are not held because the teacher is mean, but because their role as teachers require this form of disciplining and ensuring effort. At various times, Alice portrays her teachers as trustworthy adults.

Interviewer: [...] What if you were a teacher? What would you do to understand if your pupils have learnt?

Alice: So, I ... I do not want to be a mean teacher because the pupils might get hurt. However, I do not want to be too good either, because then you get to the point that you never do written exams. You never do oral exams. I want to be a regular teacher who, when needed, does oral exams, when it becomes more necessary does written exams.

(Daffodil_transcript_16, Pos. 185–186)

Alice describes the teacher's role in terms of pedagogical relationships with children, balancing between not being mean to children and not being too mild but doing what becomes "necessary". By claiming she wanted to be a "regular" teacher, she rationalises this to balance the antinomic tasks of teachers supporting and assessing. For Alice, thus, assessment is necessary and primarily employable when children show little commitment, but as a teacher, you also need to guarantee that children are not getting hurt.

In her narrations, Alice documents, on the one hand, a clear picture of a "good" and adjusted pupil regarding adults' expectations and positions her visible effort at the centre of these reflections. On the other hand, she elaborates the needs of a child's well-being in primary school, which relies on trustworthy pedagogical relationships.

When asked about types of assessment in the second half of the interview, Alice reports that she experienced the situations depicted in all images, except the role-playing/singing/acting (Image 7, Figure 1). In line with what she has said about the display of learning in the learner role, out of these situations, Alice prefers the teacher-class group interaction (Image 1, Figure 1), the workgroup (Image 3, Figure 1), the oral examination (Image 2, Figure 1), and the individual presentation (Image 6, Figure 1). Indeed, in all these situations, Alice can easily "make people realise that [she] puts in the effort, that [she] also has the courage to show it" (Daffodil_transcript_16, Pos. 198).

As it resulted from both Alice's narrations and the classroom observations, teachers are the ones who hold the knowledge, and teacher-centred practices and question-developing lessons characterise Alice's everyday school life. The children's desks are arranged in lines and separated from each other. Differentiation is mainly practised as external differentiation. Opportunities for active and/or collaborative learning could be observed rarely.

5. Discussion and Implications

Focusing on children's voices is a promising perspective for gaining a deeper understanding of the pedagogical meaning of assessment in inclusive primary education. In the following paragraphs, we will contextualise the findings, reflecting on possible limitations of the approach and discussing the implications for teachers' education.

5.1. Limitations

This paper focused on assessment as a form of social practice between children and adults. Research brought into practice by children and adults but conducted only by adults can be seen and understood as a social practice with its differently shaped social roles.

Asymmetries between researchers, who rely on the generation and discursive negotiation of new scientific knowledge and positioning in the academic world, and children, who do not have direct access to this, cannot be fully resolved in research processes that aim at eliciting children's voices.

A further specific limitation of the approach is that the interviews took place in school buildings during school days, which meant that researchers could be partly perceived as actors belonging to the school world. The children's experience further reinforced this, as they were familiar with people coming from university attending their school during internships for teacher education. Even if this detail had been clearly explained, the children sometimes needed help to perceive the interviewers as researchers rather than as (additional) teachers. Therefore, the power relationships entertained within the school context between children and adults must be considered and reflected as a limitation of the present study [98]. That is, since the research was conducted in an educational setting, Alice and the other children needed to be seen within the institution's boundaries and the social situation, which specify their possibilities for action [78] also in the interview situation.

Further, it should be considered that the interviews were conducted in German and Italian, which were not some children's first languages either. Therefore, the multilingual research team had to look carefully for linguistic equivalents and refers to the general limitations of language-based research instruments and data analysis.

Finally, a specific limitation of this paper is the mere focus on one exemplary case in favour of an in-depth analysis and a more detailed understanding. The findings can thus be generalised only on a more abstract level, as the following discussion makes clear, and which could be further differentiated by type-formation and case-comparative analyses, though the latter, however, is not the subject of the present article.

5.2. Discussion

First of all, Alice's narratives and descriptions exemplify, on a general level, that assessment occupies a key position in the processes and dynamics of "doing school". Assessment practices can, this way, be seen as a "rehearsal stage" for negotiating and familiarising oneself with roles and role expectations and for testing and enacting these in the form of "doing student" and "doing teacher" during situations in which assessment takes place as a social practice. In these social practices, the unequal power relationship between teacher and pupil is enacted as the "backstage" of schooling [99].

In her reflections on assessment, like many other children in our study, Alice mainly reflects on the pedagogical relationship between children and adults in primary school. Assessment is, thus, at the same time the decisive field of action in which the stability of the pedagogical relationships between children and adults must prove itself, as children are reliant on adults' trustworthiness. Within this framework, Alice demonstrates that she is aware of the importance of showing how she is capable and willing to take responsibility for her learning, this way "working" pragmatically on her role.

Accordingly, and in line with the findings of Bonanati [100], who was able to show in an analysis of dialogues on learning between teachers and pupils that even when teachers align themselves to participation as a norm and give children the responsibility for their learning development, they are nevertheless—as children—attributed fewer participation rights. Intergenerational power imbalances limit the call for more children's participation through self-assessment.

In the case of Alice, this is documented in a specific way. By describing her role and the teacher's role alternating between a babysitter and a distanced but reliable adult person, on the one hand, she—implicitly—refers to the above-mentioned crucial antinomy of teacher's professionalism [7]. On the other hand, she is reflecting on power imbalances in primary school in a specific way where she seems to be aware of the reciprocal dynamic of these roles—equipped with different and complementary entitlements and scopes of action but this way dependent on each other. Power-related social interactions between teachers as adults and pupils as children do not get their form unilaterally. They both depend on each

other and shape them together actively. In the interview context, Alice thus shows herself consistently not only in the role of a well-adjusted “good pupil” and as someone who knows how to define and assign roles. By assigning her teacher the role of a babysitter in this context, she brings the teacher’s professionalism close to a service available to children in private spheres. In this way, Alice turns herself into the director of the stage play. Thus, she redefines the child’s role into a powerful position that takes up services from adults, staging power imbalances in a playful, friendly, and approachable way in the interview.

Finally, it is not enough to ask for “greater” children’s participation in assessment processes. Instead, this means that assessment practices should be reflected, first and foremost, as a pedagogical part of professionalism to create the ground for diagnostic and content-related professionalism of teachers in this regard. Didactical conclusions drawn from the present study should therefore focus primarily on the pedagogical dimension of teaching, this way also considering incidents of children constantly balancing the demands of school norms and the norms of their peer groups in classrooms [101,102] by, for instance, striving to manage peer conflicts in a “face-saving” way.

Asking from here on a more concrete level what that means for the further development and conceptualisation of inclusion-related appropriate instruments and strategies for assessment and didactics, one can, first of all, say that overcoming the idea of one-size-fits-all on the level of teaching methods is deeply reliant on appropriate assessment strategies and dialogues on learning, as it goes with facing not only the overall diversity of learning styles and approaches but also one of the diverging learning perspectives and individual goals for each child. This way, it can be asked for practices of assessment based on individual recognition and peer-based solidarity in children’s groups shaped by diversity [16].

Referring to our findings on strategies and pragmatics of working on roles of “good” students, documented in Alice’s narrations, we argue that reflections on the outlined dynamics of habitual assignments are of great importance. Alice’s case informs us about an individual type of high capability of children playing the game of schooling. However, it this way also reminds us of diverging habitually framed experiences of “doing student”—as we found in many cases of other children. Critical reflections on possibly implicit stereotype-thread expectations on children’s school habitus by teachers are therefore highly implicated.

5.3. Implications

It becomes clear that assessment is vital to improving high-quality primary schooling, particularly within inclusive school systems. Indeed, children’s narrations show how their roles and the ones of adults inform and shape each other in a context where unequal access to knowledge is explicit. In conclusion, it is insufficient to strengthen teachers on inclusion-informed didactic and methodological strategies to develop high-quality teaching. Instead, assessment practices should be considered in this context. Particularly, types of learning documentation which enable a dialogue about learning and learning diversity are implied here [27,73,103–105] in the frame of a habitual-critical approach as outlined above. Thus, different types of assessment shape the intergenerational relationship between teachers and students in primary schools in a specific way. At the same time, the pedagogical relationships predominantly shape the character and impact of assessment practices.

In addition, it is worthwhile in school development programs to work on a pedagogically reflected, jointly supported concept of achievement and assessment that guides pedagogical and didactic practices and considers opportunities for the participation of children reflected within the intergenerational role structures [106] of primary schools. The school’s cultural work on a reflective understanding of assessment is essential for inclusive school development [107]. This is relevant in educational systems such as the Italian one, which is significantly shaped by inclusion but is still informed by meritocratic norms and cultures.

Finally, policy-driven programmes and agendas aimed at high-quality descriptive feedback in report cards will only be effective to a limited extent as long as no work is

conducted on related teaching approaches and, in particular, on the pedagogical dimension of teaching within a frame of learning diversity. In-service training aimed at improving the quality of teaching should thus include reflections on different forms of assessment and their impact on pedagogical relationships. Further, teacher education, aimed at new forms of descriptive reporting in primary schools, should refer to pedagogical relationships, social roles, and social practices as part of teaching. It should include the recognition of professional responsibility and the accompanying power asymmetry in the classroom and consider the institutionally given powerful role of teachers. Ultimately, in an inclusive educational system, teachers are asked to support all pupils in their individual learning and educational processes in the best possible way during their professional mandate.

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