

What do children think about grading?

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Abstract

This research explores children's perceptions of grading, emphasizing its socially constructed nature and its impact on educational equity and inclusion. Through picture-mediated narrative interviews, 35 third-grade students from six primary schools participated. The findings reveal a range of opinions, with a preference for numerical grades alongside recognition of the informational value of descriptive assessments. A critical awareness of social dynamics within the classroom and mutual expectations related to assessment also emerged. Children's preferences appear influenced by contextual factors, such as the local adaptation of national regulations and the teaching practices used in classrooms. This study highlights the relevance of viewing children as knowledgeable social actors within their school environment, acknowledging their ability to reflect on assessment practices.

La presente ricerca esplora le percezioni dei bambini riguardo alla valutazione scolastica, ponendo l'accento sul suo carattere socialmente costruito e sulle sue implicazioni per l'equità e l'inclusione educativa. Attraverso un approccio qualitativo, basato su interviste narrative mediate da immagini, sono stati coinvolti 35 alunni di classe terza di sei scuole. I risultati evidenziano una complessità di opinioni, con una preferenza per i voti numerici, pur riconoscendo il valore informativo di valutazioni più descrittive. Emerge inoltre una consapevolezza critica sulle dinamiche sociali in classe e sulle aspettative reciproche in relazione alla valutazione. Le preferenze espresse dai bambini sembrano influenzate da fattori contestuali, come l'inquadramento delle normative nazionali a livello locale e le pratiche didattiche adottate nelle scuole. Lo studio sottolinea l'importanza di considerare i bambini come attori sociali esperti della loro vita a scuola e di riconoscere la loro capacità di riflettere sulle pratiche valutative.

Keywords: assessment; grades; primary school; inclusive education; childhood studies

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Parole chiave: valutazione; voti; scuola primaria; didattica inclusiva; childhood studies

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1. Introduction

The topic of assessment and grading has been widely and controversially debated for decades (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Earl, 2003), closely linked to ideas of the underlying concepts of achievement and the societal role of school (Ricken, 2018). In Europe, numerical grades are used mainly in countries with early selection and less in more inclusive countries (Brügelmann, 2014; Peacock, 2016). In Italy, the 2020 shift from numerical grading to descriptive report cards in primary schools (MIUR, 2020; Nigris & Agrusti, 2021) was discussed as significant for a professional educational practice geared towards heterogeneity (Seitz, 2024). However, just three years later, political debates have led to the reintroduction of synthetic grading (i.e., insufficient, sufficient, good, very good and excellent; *giudizi sintetici*; Legge 150/2024 It.).

Debates on the 2020 reform (Corsini, 2023) highlight its potential to strengthen the link between teaching, learning, and assessment, promoting a formative approach to assessment at the classroom level and opening up to new conceptualisations (Piscozzo & Stefanel, 2022). However, these debates also emphasise the need for further teacher training (cf. Benvenuto, 2021, p. 16; Bertolini & Pintus, 2022, p. 95; Corsini & Gueli, 2022). This indicates the potential for heterogeneity-orientated didactic approaches integrating formative assessment forms (Wisniewski, Zierer & Hattie, 2020). Within this discourse, the concept of competence is particularly prominent, aligning with an evidence-based approach that focuses on defined learning objectives and the continuous and precise documentation of varied learning outcomes (cf. Agrusti, 2021a; 2021b) and teachers' diagnostic skills. Current debates on grading, however, seem to pay less attention to pedagogical reflections on the role of achievement in teacher-student and peer relationships (Earl, 2013). They also seem to overlook educational-scientific considerations about achievement as an institutionally produced concept which comes into practice through social interactions and is linked with the production of social difference in schools (Boalar et al., 2005; Bräu, 2015).

Assessment in schools, whether consciously or unconsciously, is inevitably based on certain reference values or benchmarks. Following a pedagogical understanding of achievement, international educational science discourses refer mainly to three reference norms for categorising academic achievement (Rheinberg, 1983): the individual reference norm (where the benchmark is the child's previous performance), the social reference norm (where the benchmark is the social group performance is assessed in), and the criterial or curricular reference norm (where the benchmark is set by the learning objectives, competence levels or curriculum). Thus, a professional approach to assessment requires primary school teachers to balance these norms to account for the children's diverse prerequisites and learning conditions, that is, to relate the individual and social reference norm in a pedagogically appropriate manner and to reflect them within the criterial one (Jürgens & Sacher, 2008; Merk & Bez, 2023). In inclusion-related debates on teacher's professionalism, the relevance of the individual reference norm, along with formative assessment and participatory practices like student-teacher-conferences is recommended (Liebers, 2023; Beutel 2023; Peacock, 2016). In contrast, the social reference norm is often criticised for undermining participation and motivation by promoting competition among the diverse learners and diminishing individual recognition (Winter, 2018; Prengel, 2016).

Viewed through a difference theory lens, achievement is related to the respective system norms and the quality of schooling; it is understood as socially constructed in institutional contexts and therefore not as a 'neutrally' measurable variable (Bräu, 2015). Related constructions of differences in achievement in the classroom produce subjectification effects (Boalar et al., 2005). Based on this, a standardisation of competences is primarily criticised for implicitly conforming to assumptions of normality (such as monolingualism) creating barriers for learners who fall outside the norm (Florian et al., 2016; Gomolla, 2012; Seitz et al., 2016).

For a long time, the educational science discourses on assessment practices in the Italian education system were characterised by close references to test theory principles (Ebel & Frisbie, 1991). The idea of a standardisation of ability and achievement based on a statistical mean puts into focus the social reference norm which is based on average class performance (*valutazione normativa*). This approach, however, conflicts partly with the inclusion-related system requirements, which demand that diversity of learning and individualised learning objectives be prioritised (Liebers, 2023; Seitz, 2024). It was only in the context of the increased focus on competences in the wake of international benchmarking studies that the criterial reference norm gained more attention in debates (*valutazione criteriale*; Agrusti, 2021a). This is reflected in current discourses on descriptive assessment and its practical applications. It is recommended that lessons be didactically designed around predefined competence objectives, with four levels used to document individual achievement (Agrusti, 2021a). This approach is closer to an individual-criterial reference norm as envisaged in the context of inclusion-related debates (Prenzel, 2017). However, recontextualising the regulations, at the level of school administration, the currently applicable rules for descriptive judgements are partly structured in a taxonomy of learning which is quite similar to Bloom's taxonomies of learning (Anderson et al., 2001). Four levels of learning (*livelli di apprendimento*; advanced, intermediate, basic, in the process of being acquired for the first time), displayed with four dimensions (*dimensioni*; autonomy, continuity, (un)known situation, resources mobilised) of learning (Agrusti, 2021a) are suggested in the referred guidelines. Thus, the new regulation on descriptive reporting at administrative level has focused mainly on teachers' diagnostic competences and precise documentation of learning processes. Reflections on the socially constructed nature of assessment and of its impact on educational (in)equity (Earl, 2013; Seitz et al., 2024a), seem to be receiving less attention. This is particularly noteworthy given the specific demands on assessment in an inclusive education system and the increasing social diversity in schools. In this regard, it is crucial to understand how these frictions are navigated at the level of social practices in classrooms and how different actors experience them. This qualitative study addresses this research gap by exploring children's views on achievement and assessment within the broader context of equity and inclusion (project CRISP – Children's perceptions of Performance in Primary Schools; 2021-2024). This paper discusses the findings on children's perspectives on grading in relation to teaching and learning in their classrooms.

2. Theoretical background

Education in primary school classrooms is embedded in complex social interactions between adults/teachers and children/students as well as in social dynamics at the level of peer-interactions. This also applies to assessment practices, which are not techniques associated with clear certainty for teachers (Biesta 2022, p. 70; Helsper, 2020, p. 181). Instead, they are characterised by the many contingencies that shape classroom practice. Expectations are mutually dependent: every child rightly assumes that the teacher expects them to learn, and the teacher, in turn, demands at least a basic willingness to learn. These expectations form the cornerstones of the educational alliance between teachers and students (cf. Helsper & Hummrich, 2008) and are interrelated through the concept of achievement in social interaction, but characterised by contingency on both sides (Meseeth, Proske & Radtke 2012, p. 224). In this context, assessment in primary schools can be seen as a social practice (Reckwitz, 2003) that produces achievement interactively and is characterised by the institutionally framed different social roles of teachers and students (cf. Rabenstein & Strauss, 2018; Heinzel, 2022). These processes cannot be considered independently of the structural frameworks of the respective education system and applicable regulations, as these are accompanied by specific scopes of action for the actors involved.

Based on these assumptions, a review of the current state of research on numerical grading reveals that international studies on the role, significance and effectiveness of grades in the frame of assessing achievement have been available for several decades (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Early research clearly demonstrated that grades - contrary to their intended purpose - are neither objective, nor valid, nor reliable (Ingenkamp, 1989) and cannot fulfil the complex educational and diagnostic expectations placed upon them (Ingenkamp & Lissmann, 2008; Jürgens, 2012). Further analyses and studies indicate that assessment is subject to complex habitus-led dynamics, shaped by habitual attributions and hegemonies (cf. Edgerton, Roberts & Peter 2013; Black et al. 2002). Consequently, it is closely linked to the reproduction and reinforcement of educational inequity within schooling (Bourdieu & Passeron 1971; Breidenstein & Thompson 2014; Gomolla, 2012; Machold & Wienand, 2021, p. 200). This applies especially to numerical grading (Baird, 2009). There is also broad consensus that grades provide limited information and are not conducive to learning (Beutel & Pant, 2020; Brügelmann, 2014; Corsini, 2023). Moreover, research has shown that descriptive, written and detailed feedback, that is specific and oriented towards individual work, correlates strongly with learning improvement (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

At the primary level, international discourse unanimously favours formative forms of assessment (cf. Earl, 2013; Peacock, 2016) in order to be able to didactically design stimulating learning experiences in heterogeneous groups (cf. Nigris & Agrusti, 2021; Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski & Colbert, 2014). Forms of documentation of learning and achievement and the dialogue around them are thus ascribed great importance for the didactic design of lessons (Beutel & Pant 2020, p. 199). Conversely, didactic strategies geared towards diversity are dependent on suitable forms of documentation and assessment (Bohl, 2001, p. 41; Earl, 2013). It is therefore remarkable that, despite the diverse studies and numerous instruments of formative assessment oriented toward heterogeneity and participation (cf. Winter, 2018), they seem to be scarcely used (OECD, 2019). Furthermore, there is very little research to date that would specifically link assessment strategies with inclusion-related quality of teaching and learning (cf. Moon, Brighton & Tomlinson, 2020; Seitz et al., 2023; Seitz, 2024; Liebers, 2023). Based on these assumptions, this article focuses on children's experiences with, and perceptions of descriptive reporting compared to numeral grading, offering insights into how the new Italian descriptive statements are reflected in specific social practices in classrooms.

3. Methodological approach

Overall, the study is definable as qualitative educational research, which gathers more detailed knowledge on achievement and assessment and their importance within the framework of an inclusively structured educational system by starting from the children's perspectives on and their understanding of the topic. The research design is theoretically based on the sociology of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1977), and uses reconstructive methods accordingly (Bohnsack, 2017). Viewing children's conceptions of achievement and assessment as socio-cultural products, the focus within this framework has been the practical production of the social in relation to (co-constructed) notions of achievement and assessment. Referring to praxeology (Reckwitz, 2003) it is assumed that the children's knowledge in terms of their social constructions of the topic can only ever be understood and reconstructed in relation to a social practice. Consequently, the empirical study aimed overall to reconstruct children's practical knowledge in relation to achievement and assessment through narrations of social practices in the course of narrative interviews.

A second methodological reference point is therefore the "Newer new Childhood Research", which sees childhood as a construct of generational relationships and as characterised by norms which shape social practices within institutions (Kelle & Mierendorff, 2013). This perspective considers children as social actors and experts

in their own lives within primary schools (Soffer & Ben Arie, 2014; Cook-Sather, 2018) contrasting with the notion of childhood as a protected space. A relational understanding of agency (Eßer, 2014) posits however, that dependency between children and adults is unavoidable (Deckert-Peaceman, 2022), raising questions about how to capture children's perspectives, which are dependent on those of adults. With reference to this debate in childhood research, our study introduces children's orientations regarding achievement and assessment which are shaped within educational situations designed by adults, where children adapt and – in part also reinterpret – these institutionally arranged settings (Heinzel, 2022). This approach considers achievement and assessment in schools as institutions, which are charged with powerful dynamics regarding processes of subjectivation as more or less capable and of (learning) differences within groups (Boalar et al., 2005). While respecting this limitation, we captured children's views on assessment and reconstructed the documented social sense. The sampling focused on children who experienced both numerical grades (in their first school year) and descriptive report cards (in their second and third school year), and was based on the principle of minimum and maximum contrast (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Alderson & Morrow, 2011) to create a heterogeneous sample in terms of gender, learning levels, and life situations. Specifically, children were identified on the basis of two-day classroom observations and information from the classroom teachers, who possessed in-depth knowledge of their students, ensuring a range of diversity. Thus, thirty-five third graders from six primary schools in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano (three of them with Italian and three with German as the first language of instruction) were interviewed through material based narrative interviews (Hunner-Kreisel & Kuhn, 2011) that explored the diverse assessment practices and related social practices in their daily school-life. Prior to conducting interviews, ethical considerations were paramount. Families provided informed consent, and children were thoroughly informed about the research's purpose, the confidentiality of their anonymous contributions, and were asked to provide their assent. In addition, the remaining children in these classes participated in small focus groups which were not further analysed.

The school system in the province is characterised by separate school administrations according to the three official languages of the region (Wisthaler, 2013). Consequently, when it comes to the implementation of new regulations and laws, the differently administered schools often realise measures with slightly diverging priorities. This was also the case for the new regulation on descriptive reporting. In Italian-language schools report cards should contain the so-called levels of learning along with a global description of the child (Direzione Istruzione e Formazione italiana, 09/2020). In German-language primary schools the new law was introduced through the proposal of three forms of report cards (i.e., subject-specific description of the learning development, multi-subject area description of the learning development, holistic learning report/learning letter; Circular no. 48/2020). Therefore, investigating the topic within primary schools of both educational languages appeared valuable.

The interviews were mediated using pictures representing possible practices of assessment (see Figure 1). The children were asked to describe them and to reflect on whether they had ever found themselves in such situations. Classroom observations over two days preceded the data collection, situating the children's reflections in the educational and didactical context. To authentically reconstruct the children's perspectives (Trautmann, 2010; Kruse et al., 2012), interviews were conducted in their preferred language – Italian or German – considering possible local dialectal nuances. The interviews took place individually in a quiet, familiar room during the school day. To handle bilingual data, Open Coding as defined within Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1996) was used to structure and analyse the data thematically. Interviews were transcribed in the original language, but coding was conducted in English to develop main categories and identify key thematic shifts. Dense

sequences were then analysed in depth using the Documentary Method (Bohnsack, 2017; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2013).

4. Overview of findings

Analysing the children’s narratives about assessment and achievement revealed several overarching findings and implications (cf. Seitz et al., 2023; Seitz et al., 2024b). Firstly, it is noticeable that the children discuss these issues by describing their pedagogical relationships with their teachers, i.e., by identifying assessment as a social practice taking place between children and adults in their social roles as students and teachers. Secondly, they attribute a crucial role to assessment in demonstrating learning in the “public” of classrooms. Specifically, they recognize the distinction between summative assessment and the performance of learning in the classroom when they talk about the learning processes themselves. Thirdly, in their reports, they recognize and describe both the emotions elicited by these pedagogical relationships and the teachers’ expectations of them. They describe how they organise their behaviour in the sense of classroom public performance in relation to mutual habitual expectations, for example by describing strategies of showing themselves as “good students” in the school context. Demonstrating effort at school is presented by them as a key strategy for influencing teachers’ documentations of learning outcomes. In this way, the children demonstrate their ability to navigate the contingencies in the classroom environment, strategically working to minimise or close these gaps. Furthermore, the narratives implicitly suggest that mutual expectations are related to the didactic setting. The teaching-learning-style, that is, the didactic approach to the diversity of learning and the respective focus on processes or outcomes of learning, seems to have interesting interdependencies with the pedagogical dynamics described by the children. Thanks to classroom observations, we identified three types of teaching-learning styles (Table 1), and we asked to what extent children’s reflections on achievement and assessment relate to them and the pedagogical-didactical contexts observed.

In this paper, we have sought to elaborate on these results, by quantitatively analysing assessment practices, and thematically discussing related qualitative findings. We address specific sections or macro-questions from the interviews, particularly focusing on report cards and achievement-related social practices in the classroom.

Table 1. Teaching-learning styles observed

Teaching-Learning Style 1	teacher-centred, desks arranged in a row, standardised learning.
Teaching-Learning Style 3	student-centred, no classrooms but subject-related rooms, high participation, self-regulated learning, desks arranged in groups or a circle, open teaching style, project-oriented learning, assessment as an integral part of the learning processes.
Teaching-Learning Style 2	a mixture of the above.

4.1 Grading vs report cards: children’s views

In this section, we discuss children’s narrations to the impulse: Do you remember that in previous years’ report cards, there were marks instead of descriptions / words? What do you think about both? Please explain. Overall, although the O.M. 172/2020 (MIUR, 2020) prescribes that report cards include a descriptive form along with learning levels (*livelli di apprendimento*), it emerges from the children that numerical grades still play a significant role in their daily experience at school. Some children’s narratives suggest teachers use the above outlined learning levels in their daily and periodic assessments.



Twenty-four children prefer numerical grades over descriptions, finding them clearer and easier to understand. July says that “it’s clearer”, Lion mentions “[I] know what they gave me”, Bulbassaur, Tony, and Ronaldo argue that they “don’t understand” these words. Blue argues “[...] with the text you cannot tell if it is good or not ... with numbers maybe a little bit more” while Cool and 1787 agree, noting that grades were simply easier to interpret. A further five children felt the text in the new report card was too long and preferred grades because they do not like reading or do not feel capable of it. For instance, Sophy explains that she “cannot read yet” and Alice mentions that “if children want to read it by themselves, they don’t understand at all”. Jo explains: “because then [with numbers] you can also quickly read it at school ... and with the text, you need to read so much, and you can only read it at home when you have lots of time.” Robert argues in a change of perspective with adults, whom he assumes have little patience for reading long texts: “... and so also the adults do not get angry if they need to read all of this for half an hour.” Meanwhile, Lionel Messi uses a different line of reasoning when he reflects that “with the grades ... there is just the bad mark, but what I did is not written for example”, finding a positive aspect in the lack of information provided by grades compared to qualitative descriptions of him. Lastly, two children like both forms of grading, with Lionel Messi stating “both are ... well, good ... but I just like marks a bit better. ... but I like the text too”.

Regarding the four levels described, which are partly used, children closely associate them with grades. For example, Lightning21 declares he “understood better before, because now, for example, advanced means 9-10, intermediate 8-9, so they are not exact grades”. Some children emphasise the issue of unclear equivalency. For instance, Unicorn says “basic is like a 6 or a 7, so I don’t know if I got a 6 or a 7, even though the numbers are not very far apart”. Additionally, July points out that her report cards lack descriptive comments providing only “something like, ‘July was a good child, she always completed everything, etc., etc.’”. Therefore, according to some children’s narrations, they interpret levels, which are not supported by verbal descriptions, similarly to numerical grades. In any case, the children associate quantitative values with them. The exact ‘value’ of a level seems less clear and numerical grades are consequently seen as more concise.

Nevertheless, nine children state explicitly to prefer verbal descriptions. Jean explains “because they are prettier, and numbers are a bit complicated”. Alex finds that words “seem bigger”, meaning they feel more grown up or meaningful, “like in high school”. Five children share their reasons for preferring verbal feedback, with three arguing that grades lack information about learning. Wally remarks: “Because with the numbers there are...well, you don’t know if it is 9 or 8 what you could do better. And if, for example, it always says in the text what you can do better” while Lucky Clover emphasises that verbal descriptions reflect personality and not only academic performance: “This report card [is better] because with the other [the one with grades] it shows how good you are and with this one [the verbal one] it is also about how I am, how I react.” Finally, Green points out why texts are better than grades: “[...] but then there was the problem that they [the marks] have always been compared [...] and now this is not possible anymore with the text [...] you cannot compare at all anymore.”

Notably, four of the seven children who prefer the verbal grading were the children from a school with a student-centred teaching approach, while two come from a school with a mixed approach. Overall, it can be summarised that the children provide very precise reasons for why they prefer numerical or verbal grading. While children who prefer numerical grading tend to mention aspects that relate to the product itself (such as comprehensibility and addressability), children who prefer descriptive grading cite arguments related to the quality of learning, social relationships, and recognition as individuals.

4.2 Achievement-related social practices in the classroom - children's experiences

Focusing on the children's experiences and views on achievement-related social practices in the classroom, the specific interview question was: How does your teacher know that you have learnt something? Referring to the children's accounts they associate every-day practices around student-teacher-communication, but also marks, brief written judgements (e.g., good, excellent), short comments (e.g., well done, improve, one mistake), emoticons, and symbols in this context. From these narrations it emerges that achievement-related social practices vary. Some children report receiving evaluations from written tests using the previously described levels in a quantitative structure, associating them with numerical grades – which appears to cause confusion as they do not seem to match clearly. Other children mention verbal synthetic judgments or short comments, as illustrated by July: “Basically, they usually tell us: ‘well done July! You did well! You only made two mistakes!’ (Enthusiastic tone imitating the teacher) [...] and then they say: ‘you got advanced, intermediate, ...’”.

It is notable that in the context of the question about how the teacher knows that students have ‘learnt something’, many children primarily reflect on making mistakes, doing things correctly or incorrectly, and the quantity of errors. In contrast, motivation, interests or further learning steps do not seem to be the focus for the majority of children. For example, Alice seems to perceive feedback as a means for children to identify possible mistakes: “yes, especially in my sheets, which I do, and but, they give you a good, an improve, [...] ‘beware, an error’, [...] these things here” which resonates with Wally's reflections on the purpose of tests.

IG: Now, I wonder how your teacher knows whether you've learnt something.

Wally: Yes, we often do a test afterwards ... and then we just put the pencil case up so the other person can't copy it. Yes, and then she can see whether many of us have wrong answers or not.

IG: Mhm. So, she corrects the tests, does she?

Wally: Yes.

IG: Ok. Um...

Wally: And she also sees whether we've worked hard by writing something and if we've made a lot of mistakes, then we haven't paid much attention.

Here, Wally explains that a summative method like doing tests goes hand in hand with a ban on collaboration. According to his account, correcting a test helps the teacher to determine if the children worked hard or were inattentive during the lesson - reflecting feelings of being controlled and the disciplinary subjectivation effects of feedback based on the quantity of mistakes.

In the class with a student-centred teaching approach, children report using a clipboard with tasks outlined in a weekly plan. Teachers sign off when children complete something but also provide comments and reflections. As Flora explains:

... then she sometimes says, ‘Now you can do something else’... ehm or stuff like that. [...] And if I don't know what to... do... or what I should do, then I just ask a teacher and... then she gives me a few ideas.

According to the children's accounts, along with the signature, they receive verbal feedback or guidance on how to proceed along their individual learning pathways. The tasks chosen in class may vary, allowing for a high level of participation. If Flower lacks direction about the next learning step, he knows that he can ask the teacher, who then takes on the role of a learning counsellor and offers suggestions. In this context, two children reflect more closely on the resulting pedagogical relationships and describe the emotional dimension linked to them, as Lucky Clover does:

IG: Mhm. And does the teacher look at what you've done?

Lucky Clover: Yes, because otherwise they don't know what I've learnt.

IG: Mhm. And do they give you something back when they look at it...

Lucky Clover: Mmmeeehhh I don't think anything that you can see... and touch... but only something you can feel.

IG: What can you feel, for example, what would be...?

Lucky Clover: For example, like this... anger when something has gone really badly... or love when things have gone really well. [...]

IG: Why do you think the teachers do that?

Lucky Clover: Yes, because they feel it and then I feel it too. [...] maybe they don't realise it but their heart notices it and gives ... love to other children.

For Lucky Clover, feedback is primarily provided through dialogue between children and adults. This form of achievement-related social practice elicits various emotions in the child but seems to be characterised by transparency and trustworthiness.

In summary, achievement-related social practices in the classroom primarily align with the didactic approach and, secondly, with how higher-level regulations are reconstructed by teachers and children at differently administered schools at the classroom level.

4.3 How assessment takes place: the picture choice

The interviews were mediated using pictures (Figure 1), which presented eight situations: (1) teacher-class group interaction/students' feedback, (2) oral examination, (3) peer-group work, (4) teacher-student collaboration/student-teacher conferences, (5) written test, (6) individual presentation, (7) role-playing, and (8) group work presentation. In the second part of the interview, children were shown the pictures and asked: "Have you ever been in any of these situations? Choose the ones you have experienced". They were free to share their experiences related to those moments.

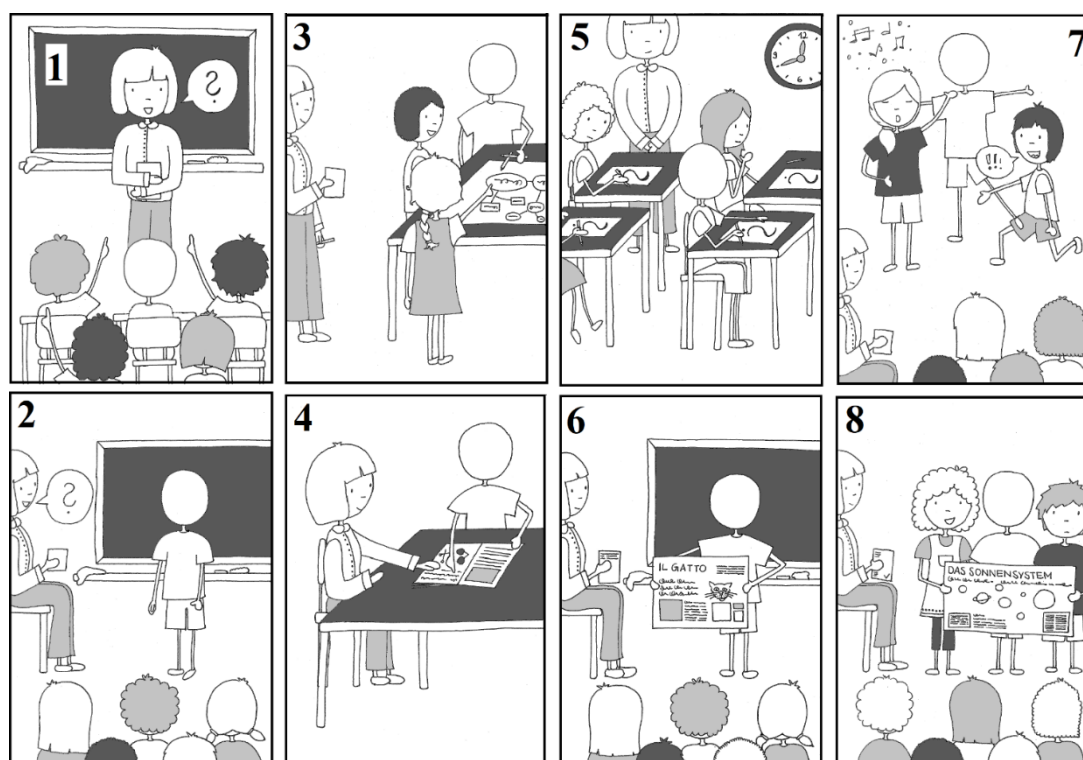


Figure 1. Pictures used in the narrative interviews (© Petra Auer)

Complementary to the qualitative data analysis, we compared the results of the image choices among groups of children from classes with different didactic approaches (Table 1: teacher-learning style 1 $n=31$, teacher-learning style 2 $n=5$, teacher-learning style 3 $n=24$) using bar graphs (Figure 2). As the bar graphs indicate, the most significant evidence can be seen for images (1) teacher-class group interaction/students' feedback, (2) oral examination, (5) written examination, (6) individual presentation, (7) role playing, and (8) group presentation. Children in teacher-centred educational environments report experiencing assessment practices such as teacher-class group interactions (1), oral examinations (2), workgroups (3), teacher-student interactions (4), and written examinations (5) to a greater extent. In contrast, children who participate in student-centred educational practices daily, report experiencing more workgroups (3) and group presentations (8). They also report, though to a lesser extent than the first group, teacher-class group interactions (1), oral examinations (2), teacher-student interactions (4), and individual presentations (6). Lastly, children attending a mixed teaching-approach class select all pictures in large numbers except for role-playing (7).

In a second step, we aimed to explore the relationship between the two categorical variables: "didactical approach" and "students' picture choices" regarding assessment situations. To determine whether there is an association between the pedagogical-didactical style and the types of assessment experienced, we employed the Chi-square test for independence. This test accommodates variables with more than two categories (such as teaching-learning styles) and compares the observed frequencies or proportions of cases occurring in each category with the values expected if no association exists between the two measured variables. However, our data did not meet the test prerequisites, nor those for Fisher's exact probability test. Indeed, the Chi-square test's assumption of expected frequencies above 5 was violated, and Fisher's exact test, which requires a 2x2 table, could not be applied to our 3x2 data (cf. Pallant, 2011, p. 217).

The results indicate that as the teaching approach becomes more student-centred, the assessment approach aligns accordingly. Conversely, the more the teaching approach is teacher-centred, children report more summative types of assessment, such as tests and oral examinations in the classroom. While these methods are not exclusively summative, and can be used formatively, they are often implemented as such, and are less frequent than authentic assessments in student-centered classrooms. In other words, in teacher-centred classrooms, teaching and assessment appear to be experienced as more separate from each other, with assessment following teaching. In contrast, in student-centred environments, assessment plays a crucial role in guiding both learning and teaching (Corsini, 2023; Winter, 2018).



Figure 2. Image choices among groups of children from classes with different educational styles

5. Limitations

Before discussing the results and deriving conclusions, several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. The first limitation concerns the specific interview situation: a child and an adult in the school context. This dynamic may lead to a certain ‘performance’ by the children in the interview itself (Seitz et al., 2024b). Although the researchers attempted to reduce the power imbalance between the interviewer (adult) and the respondents

(children) by clearly explaining the purpose of the interview and fostering the children's self-confidence by positioning them in the role of the expert at the beginning of the interview (cf. Vogl, 2015), intergenerational power relations are very likely to remain influential to a certain extent (Reppin, 2021).

A second limitation relates to the small quantitative analysis of the data reported above. Even so, the findings from the quantitative analysis support a link between teaching-learning approaches and social practices of assessment. This provides specific insights into the findings regarding children's views on grading as discussed in the following section.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In summary, children encountered a range of assessment practices and related social practices in their daily school lives. They associated certain assessment practices with different types of pedagogical relationships, demonstrating an awareness of specific role expectations and their own possibilities for action within these frameworks. Children familiar with formative, descriptive and individualised assessment types appreciate these forms. However, it is surprising that many children express a preference for numerical grading when asked about annual reports. Interestingly, some of these children note that grades provide less personal information about the individual, highlighting indirectly the importance of trustworthiness in more complex assessment types (Crick, 2010). Furthermore, some children argue that grades are easier and quicker to read. This observation aligns with research findings indicating that children's willingness and interest in receiving reports are directly related to their reading abilities (Beutel & Vollstädt, 2002, p. 609). This is particularly relevant given the diverse reading skills present in primary school classes.

Children's views on reporting and grading may be shaped by how report cards are written and communicated (or not) between children, teachers and families. This is especially significant in the context of multilingualism and dialects within the families represented in this sample. Furthermore, the research shows that report cards are most effective when the content is individualised, whereas children do not find them helpful if they consist only of standardised formulations and predefined text modules (Beutel, 2011). The communicative practices around issuing report cards could play a significant role in better understanding children's perspectives. However, the key point children make when asked about their preferences is their emphasis on understanding the document. This highlights their interest in assessment, their awareness of its importance, and their role within related social practices. Their desire to understand and to communicate underlines their agency in these processes. Thus, writing good quality report cards that recognise children as capable of understanding their role at school and attribute agency to them is challenging and implies new ways of communication between teachers and children as well as specific impulses for teachers' qualifications and their professionalisation (Benvenuto, 2021).

Examining the different types of report cards developed in the differently administered primary schools with Italian or German as the language of instruction reveals interesting preferences. Notably, more children attending Italian-language primary schools prefer numerical grades, while nearly half of the children attending German-language primary schools favour descriptive report cards. This could be an important indication of the relevance of specific recontextualization of national regulatory requirements at regional administrative and school level, as these appear to be documented in the described social practices.

The findings indicate specific relationships between the pedagogical-didactical approach and the forms of assessment. In student-centred classes, summative forms of assessment (e.g., written examinations) are used less frequently, with a preference for more formative, process-oriented methods which allow collaborative learning *and* performing (e.g., group presentations, student-teacher-conferences). The results suggest that more complex

forms of assessment are more likely to be implemented within student-centred teaching. If children experience an open teaching style with formative, communicative feedback on their achievements, they tend to value these methods and prefer report cards that reflect this approach.

Further debates on forms of assessment should therefore focus more explicitly on developing didactic approaches that address the heterogeneity within primary school classes and emphasise student-centeredness, individualisation, collaboration, and participation in assessment and learning processes. Such a clear conceptual focus on the heterogeneity in primary schools within our inclusive education system would likely encourage the use of formative, inclusive methods and could contribute to consistency of learning and assessment. Concepts of inclusive didactics, characterised by individually challenging learning within a socially supportive environment and a pedagogical relationship based on personal recognition and trustworthiness between students and teachers (Seitz, 2020), could provide valuable starting points here, although many questions remain regarding children's participation in assessment processes (Bonanati, 2018). Further theoretical investigation is also necessary to better understand the relationship between achievement and inclusion.

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