

How Parents Understand Evaluation Process – Mental Models as the Main Obstacle for Engaging Parents in School Evaluation

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One of the most important elements of the recent reform of the school inspection system in Poland is to focus on the parents' voice through the collection of data during evaluation process in schools. Three years of experience with this system has shown that there still is a lot of confusion with the actual understanding of the evaluation process among all the groups actively involved: external evaluators (school inspectors), head-teachers, teachers, and representatives of school partners, parents and students. The authors claim that this is the most important obstacle in the promotion of evaluation as a crucial element in the process of school development. The paper presents an attempt to describe different understandings of school evaluation among parents actively partaking in this process which was undertaken randomly in Polish schools of different types. The paper shows how these understandings can influence participation of parents in an external evaluation process, and following developmental activities that take place in schools. The authors claim that an understanding of different ways of thinking about evaluation process through the analysis of the metaphors used by parents can be a good basis for drawing up recommendations for those working on parents' participation in transforming school reality.

Keywords: Parental involvement, school development, evaluation, metaphors.

Introduction

The complex reality of contemporary society brings challenges to the educational systems and to schools all over the world. They have to transform and develop to face these challenges and create good conditions for individual development of the students as the main aim of schooling. It is quite obvious nowadays, as Dewey pointed out many decades ago, that it is impossible to transform schools to meet the needs of human individual development without opening up the cooperation of schools with different partners (Dewey, 1963). Parents seem to be the most important of these partners, as they assist the individual development of students more closely than the school. When the Polish educational authorities started the reform of the Polish School Inspection System in 2009,

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they intended to transform school inspection from a system of control into a system of support of school development. The reform introduced the idea of evaluation to the Polish educational system. School evaluation within this new model has two complementary forms: external evaluation carried out by inspectors from special units of the educational authorities and internal or self-evaluation carried out by schools themselves. Evaluation is designed in such a way, that the gathering of the information about the work of the school follows certain requirements and/or standards set by the state. There are 17 standards grouped in four broader areas called: educational processes, educational effects, school environment and school management. A centrally run electronic platform was set up to help collect and analyze the data. It contains all the questionnaires and other techniques used in the collection of data and can also collect, analyse and present the final data of the evaluation. It can also publish reports from external evaluations carried out which can be openly accessed.

A very important characteristic of the new way of inspection is that both external and internal evaluations have to be carried out with the active participation of the different groups within the schools and their social context. Comprising these groups there are: students, teachers, head-teachers, partners from other organizations that cooperate with schools and, last but not least, the parents. The main factor that determines the success of the introduction of the evaluation process into the educational system will be the ability to convince people who work at schools and with schools that this kind of assessment will help them in the constant improvement of the quality of their work for the benefit of the students (Mazurkiewicz, Berdzik, 2010).

Parents play one of the most important roles in this process of school evaluation. During the external evaluation process organized and run by the educational authorities' school evaluators (inspectors), all parents from a particular school are invited to answer questionnaires addressing several issues important from the perspective of the educational experience acquired by their children and the parent's involvement in school life. The questions asked cover all the 17 standards that are reviewed during the evaluation process. An additional form to collect the parent's opinions is a group interview with selected representatives of parents focused on deepening issues that were not clearly visible in the questionnaire results. There is an informal expectation that schools will also involve parents in the process of analysing the evaluation reports and of designing school development or the improvement plan.

The data collected from parents during the evaluation process allows determining that parents generally accept the schools' actions and the way the education process is managed: more than 80% of the interviewed parents are satisfied with their children's school. However, there is a significant difference between parents and children on their opinions about schools. Students, more often than parents, consider school an outdated institution that has no connection with the contemporary world. This difference grows with the increasing of age of the students. The majority of parents' accepts school and only starts to enquire when problems appear. The superficial approach may hinder the process of parental involvement in the evaluation

process considered as a developmental mechanism (Starypan, 2012).

Attempts to transform the reality of school inspection in order to increase active participation of the different actors involved, has to take into account their thinking as the main factor that may decide on the success of such a transformation. In this paper, the authors concentrate on parents' approaches to the evaluation and try to understand their mental models, beliefs or way of thinking about the school evaluation process, as they seem to be the most important force shaping the action of others (what is also true in the case of those involved in the different educational activities connected with the evaluation in schools).

The problem that the researchers experience is that, it is sometimes not easy to uncover and understand mental models or simply the way of perceiving complex ideas. People such as parents in schools have different understandings as to the concept of evaluation among others. A Canadian philosopher, Macnamara, called them *obscure ideals* and argued that people not only, have a different understanding of the ideals, such as justice, beauty (or evaluation) but they also develop them during their lives in order to make them more suitable in certain cognitive situations (Macnamara, 1990).

Why metaphors

It might be a powerful experience for people when they start to think about their mental models and their consequences. One of the possible ways to uncover these models and/or assumptions about the surrounding world might be, to ask people to construct metaphors about an interesting issue.

People use metaphors to express thoughts and feelings. For Aristotle "ordinary" words transferred only to "what we already know", while metaphors allowed to unveil and understand new, unknown meanings. Lakoff and Johnson claim that metaphors bring cognitive meanings, which cannot otherwise be discovered (Polak, 1999). A metaphor is usually defined as a stylistic figure in which at least one word takes another figurative and relatively close meaning (like hot or dirty joke). In Greek the word *metaphorá* means "transposition".

Metaphors help to explore hidden areas, but might also be the kind of information required to help notice an incomplete signal connected with a specific problem or issue. Many authors claim

that by using metaphors or by looking at them we can uncover meanings that cannot be discovered when looking at "ordinary" descriptions. When asked directly, people often try to build "proper" answers that hide some aspects of what they really think or are probably not able to express what they think.

Metaphors have a tremendous influence on the way people think about any issue. They enable certain ways of thinking by inhibiting others. And because they are usually used unconsciously, their transparency makes them even more powerful. This is why, examining the metaphors through which we describe the educational institutions and practices are so important to attempt any systemic change. Understanding the metaphors can give us a better insight into why people support or reject certain ideas. They make us aware of how differently people "create" their own realities (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980).

When we use metaphors to understand someone's thinking we usually obtain a deeper, broader and more precise understanding. It is worth remembering that a metaphor does not only serve as a description of reality, it is also a very important force influencing reality. A metaphor is often used to develop an understanding of certain phenomenon through vocabulary and concepts associated with a different area of human life and thinking. Metaphors can sometimes even create social reality. When we use metaphors to express abstract ideas, they can strongly influence our way of seeing and understanding these ideas and secondly, our actions connected with these ideas. When we for example, describe our school using expressions like: *an army* or *a garden* or *a prison* it will probably be a completely different institution because we will behave differently, according to the vocabulary used in our metaphors (Yero, 2002).

Probably everyone who has experienced the educational system has his or her own, private metaphor of school and learning. What happens when we select our favorite or the most accurate metaphor of school, education or evaluation is that we define our beliefs about it and in consequence, our behaviour. How different the attitude towards school will be that of the students, parents or teachers who will see school through the lenses of metaphors presenting it as: a prison, a zoo, and an amusement park, a temple of knowledge, a factory or a hospital? How diverse will the opinions and behaviours be,

when presented during the evaluation process by those who see evaluation as a train or a hurricane? These differences will be fundamental. Using metaphors will influence their everyday life, solving problems, their value system or the level of loyalty. The simple question that encourages presenting the evaluation process in a metaphorical way allows us to reach a level of reflection that is unattainable without metaphors.

Methodology

The research presented is a part of a wider study which was carried out during the period from January 2012 to January 2013 on a group of more than 450 subjects within three different groups: head-teachers, school inspectors (evaluators) and finally, parents. This paper presents the results of the third part of the research carried out with the participation of a randomly selected group of 150 parents who had just taken part in the external evaluation of schools as participants of the evaluation process. The research group consists of parents connected to different schools such as nursery schools (children of age 3-6), primary schools (7-12), gymnasium (13-15) and lyceum (16-19).

The main aim of the study was to investigate the parents' ways of thinking on evaluation as a process that they had just gone through. Taking into consideration the value of the method of metaphors that has already been used in many studies in the area of education, mainly to understand the thinking and development of teachers (Leavy et al. 2007, Knowles, 1994), the participants of the study were asked to think about a suitable metaphor and finish the simple sentence: *Evaluation is like.....* All collected answers were categorized taking into account the criteria such as: type of vocabulary used in the metaphor and type of association that the author of the metaphor has. Different categories of metaphors were taken from a previous analysis which was a part of a broader research done on groups of head-teachers and school inspectors (Dorczak, Mazurkiewicz, 2012). The categories of the metaphors used in previous research and found in the answers given by parents were as follows:

- pessimistic metaphors - focus on the negative aspects of evaluation, and show the problems and the difficulties they cause;

- technological metaphors - use technical vocabulary and comparisons to describe evaluation;
- philosophical metaphors - use philosophical statements to describe evaluation, usually not precise and very unclear;
- developmental metaphors - describe evaluation as a factor that influences and positively stimulates development;
- ecological metaphors - use vocabulary connected with nature to describe evaluation;
- geographical metaphors - use geographical vocabulary usually connected with journeys, maps, etc.;
- social metaphors - underline the social and inter-personal nature of evaluation as a process;
- intellectual metaphors - explain evaluation as an intellectual activity requiring intelligence;
- medical metaphors - usually treat evaluation as an illness or another health problem;

There were also several other metaphors that could not be categorized within the listed categories. Most subjects from this group use a very limited vocabulary to describe evaluation, usually words that are very close in meaning to the word evaluation.

The second part of the metaphor analysis, was an attempt to look at categories using a two-dimensional scheme. The first dimension shows how positive or negative the understanding is of evaluation expressed in metaphors. The metaphors that reject evaluation as an educationally positive process were classified as negative. The metaphors expressing the value of evaluation as a process to support schools were classified as positive. The second dimension considered the way the participants treat evaluation: either as a process that is strictly described and demands certain actions or not strictly described giving more freedom and space for flexibility and dialogue.

Results

During the categorization process, nine different types of metaphors were used. They can be divided into two broader groups: the first called negative metaphors. It was striking that more than 57 % of the parents used these types of

metaphors. They represent the thinking about evaluation in a non-positive and non-productive for schools and the educational process. Within this group there are three out of nine categories of metaphors:

Pessimistic metaphors concentrate on the negative aspects of evaluation describing it as: *a scary dream, a source of stress, a painful process, time consuming work, a stressful exam, a boring film, an unpleasant visit of rude members of family*, etc. Such metaphors show a negative attitude towards evaluation as a process and are treated as dangerous for schools and a negative experience from the point of view of the educational good. Unfortunately, as it is shown in Tab. 1 below, it is also the dominant type of metaphor expressed in parents' answers.

The second type of negative metaphors is technological metaphors that describe evaluation as a technically ordered and a precisely constructed process. For parents using this type of metaphor evaluation is: *the process of filling in tax questionnaire, a boring, too long and too detailed script, a set of physical instruments to measure school life*. Looking at the evaluation process from this technical perspective it is a limited approach from the perspective of the educational evaluation, and was also classified as negative. Parents that use these metaphors treat the evaluation process as something that is and should be controlled as a technological process in a factory. Thinking in this way about evaluation they will probably behave very formally and without a deeper educational understanding of the value of the evaluation process in schools. In our research only five parents used this type of metaphor.

The last type of negative metaphor was called medical metaphors. It addresses the evaluation as a disease or a serious health problem: *it is like flu that we all have to go through, it is like a visit to a terrible dentist, and it is like an unavoidable disease*. The metaphors using medical comparisons treat evaluation as an unpleasant process and will probably result in a quick and shallow involvement in the process that cannot really bring any real educational value for the school. As in the technological metaphors, medical metaphors were used by a small group of only five parents participating in the study.

The second group of categorized types of metaphors were defined as positive. Six different types of such metaphors are as follow:

The most frequently expressed among them were developmental metaphors. Parents using these metaphors show an understanding of the developmental and creative nature of evaluation describing it as: *the process of development of a child, an occasion for quick development, like a building process, like growth*. The developmental metaphors represent the way of thinking which treat* evaluation as a living and natural process that is necessary for the school organizational growth and the development of students. This is probably the most positive way of thinking about evaluation that lies behind metaphors. It is a very constructive factor as to how the evaluation process can positively influence the real educational changes in schools. Parents with such a way of thinking can really take an active and constructive part in the educational processes in schools. As shown in Table 1 below, twelve percent of parents use these metaphors.

Slightly less frequent are philosophical metaphors such as: *it is like counting uncountable, it is like looking for the meaning of life, it is like a spiritual experience, it is like a meeting with God*.

It seems that philosophical metaphors show that the person has a generally positive attitude towards evaluation but is not sure yet what exactly is positive in the process.

The third among the positive metaphors are called social metaphors that underline the interpersonal nature of evaluation describing it as: *joint group work on school issues that brings the best results, it is like a speech* about education, it is like a profitable meeting with important people, it is like an interesting conversation*. Evaluation in education has to be a social and interactive process and these

metaphors are obviously very positive examples of the understanding of evaluation and its role in schools. While education is a social process where learning happens through the interaction between people, evaluation of the educational processes inevitably needs to use the social context as well. Parents who understand this aspect of evaluation can probably take an educationally valuable, active part in school life.

Intellectual metaphors describe evaluations as: *an intellectual exercise, a process of looking for a solution with the use of intellectual forces, gaining understanding of school*. Such metaphors show evaluation as a very positive process that is of great importance to the school. Parents with this understanding of evaluation will probably be positively involved in any evaluation processes in their children's schools. Only four parents used this type of metaphor.

Ecological and geographical metaphors were used very rarely (three ecological metaphors and only one geographical metaphor). They describe evaluation as: *it is like a garden with all flowers, it is like the birth of spring, like a discovery of a path in unknown territory*. Both of these types of metaphors treat evaluation rather positively as something that is natural and brings good results for schools. They are similar or close to the developmental metaphors, but the use of geographical and ecological vocabulary can probably be treated as a sign of unfinished and not a precise understanding of the professional value of evaluation for schools and educational processes.

The details of the results are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Types of metaphors of evaluation used by parents

	Type of metaphor	Frequency
1	Pessimistic	76 (50, 67%)
2	Developmental	18 (12, 00%)
3	Philosophical	11 (7, 33%)
4	Social	8 (5, 33%)
5	Technological	5 (3, 33%)
6	Medical	5 (3, 33%)
7	Intellectual	4 (2, 67%)
8	Ecological	3 (2, 00%)
9	Geographical	1 (0, 67%)
10	Other/not classified	19 (12, 67%)
	TOTAL	150(100, 00%)

As mentioned before, all types of metaphors were additionally put into a two-dimensional scheme. The first dimension, shown above, enables us to decide if parents understand evaluation as something positive and supportive towards the improvement of the school, versus something negative and dangerous to their schools. The second dimension allows to decide if parents see evaluation as something strictly predefined or prescribed in a detailed way, or as something free and open, permitting dialogue, experiment, flexibility and uncertainty. Metaphors put into these dimensions connect with four associations:

Learning - in these metaphors, evaluation is a process that is less or more positively welcome with the expectation of useful information and conclusion for school development. There are differences between various categories such as a better or worse understanding of the evaluation aims or outcomes, but, in general, those metaphors indicate willingness to use the evaluation as an improvement mechanism in schools.

Bureaucracy - in these metaphors evaluation is judged positively but it seems that the main outcome is to strengthen the position of the

educational authorities and their regulations to decide about the school life. The evaluation of this type is rather a formal process of convincing people what they should or should not do, instead of having an open discussion.

Threat - in these metaphors, evaluation disturbs everyday life and the functioning of the school. The evaluation brings chaos, bad emotions and danger to the school and its children. It is not possible to achieve a positive outcome of the evaluation in the environment characterized by such features.

Anarchy - in these metaphors (not found in our research, even though philosophical, ecological and geographical metaphors are quite close to this type) the evaluation process is something that is not regulated and people have negative emotions towards it.

All four types are presented in a coordinate system where the vertical axis represents the level of optimism and belief in the developmental value of evaluation, versus pessimism and fear of the evaluation and the horizontal axis represents the level of structure in the evaluation process (from closed structure to the left to open to the right).

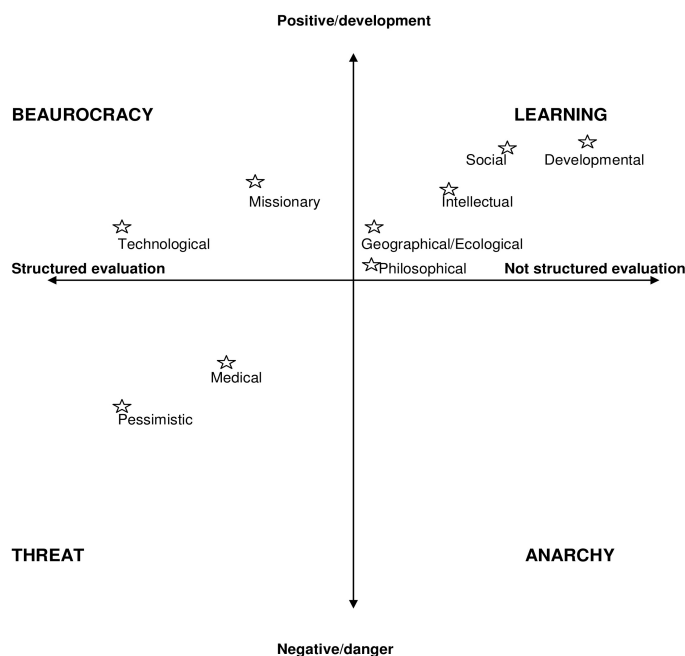


Figure 1 - Categories of evaluation metaphors in a two dimensional scheme

Source: Dorczak R., Mazurkiewicz G., (2012), *Metaphors of evaluation – how school leaders understand evaluation in schools*, in: L. Gómez Chova, A. LópezMartínez, I. Candel Torres (eds.) Proceedings of ICERI 2012 Conference, Madrid, p. 6209

As it can be seen in Figure 1, most categories of metaphors represent a positive view towards the role of evaluation in schools and treat the evaluation as an open process that is not structured and can be modified during the process in response to the needs of developing schools. Unfortunately, (from the point of view of the educational process) there are some quite frequent categories that treat evaluation as a structured process and have a mainly negative influence on school reality

Conclusions

As was shown more than half of the parents taking part in this research have a negative attitude and understanding of the evaluation. This creates a serious obstacle for the implementation of the evaluation process in the inspection system in Poland and more importantly in the introduction of parents' involvement in school development, which should be the result of parents' involvement in the evaluation process. Having such a negative attitude towards evaluation, parents will probably not cooperate during the process and they will not contribute to school development as is needed and intended by authors of the reform. Parents have to play a more active role in school life and when the reform of school inspection system presents the introduction of an evaluation process to include parental involvement most parents developed a negative attitude towards

this evaluation that prevents parental participation that is valuable to the education system. On the other hand, it is important to underline that such an attitude towards evaluation does not mean that parents have a negative attitude towards schools, as some analyses show; parents think positively about the schools of their children and have a positive attitude towards schools (Starypan, 2012).

This result suggests that it is necessary to design and implement educational cycles focused on enhancing the parents' knowledge about evaluation and its positive influence on students experience, learning and development. Such cycles have to be prepared and run on different levels of the educational system ranging from local schools to the Ministry of Education or other central educational institutions.

Positive attitudes toward evaluation are unfortunately much less frequent (around 30% of metaphors only) and create a challenge for those responsible for the transformation of the school inspection system and schools in general. They have to think seriously about all the possible ways to introduce, ideas of evaluation, as a developmental tool for schools to a wider group of parents and to public opinion. Only then can it possible to use the potential of parental and social involvement as a support to the transformation of schools for the good of individual development of all children.

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