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Relational Evaluation in the Educational Process. Key Actions for Integrating Children's Voice

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Abstract: *This paper brings into discussion a new approach concerning the evaluation of the pupils. It is widely known that education's purpose is to help children to access knowledge, an assumption met in most educational systems. Pupils are facing the curricula that often has little interest on them, and they are examined on their ability to reproduce what teachers are teaching. Education places relationships on a small scale, children are learning from a young age to compare themselves, to be competitive, to be rewarded only if they know the right answers. Drawing from a social constructionism perspective, the paper explores children's experiences regarding the evaluation within school setting. Data are coming from four focus groups with children organized between November and December 2020. Findings suggest that a relational evaluation emphasizes the process of constructing knowledge through relationships, aiming to increase school participation.*

Keywords: *evaluation; relational; school participation; vulnerability.*

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Introduction

The problems of education in Romania represent a growing concern within public debates, academic research, scholars, and practitioners especially because the school dropout, functional illiteracy, school bullying is increasing alongside low school performance, school apathy, boredom, or lack of motivation. These effects are the results of a poor investment in education, discrepancy between rural and urban environment, social exclusion, and a deficient management with an extreme focus on children's results. The traditional education has its own good sides but to keep up the steps with the current realities, it is necessarily to think new strategies for improving school participation. An extreme focus and work centered on children's results seem to be the meaning of a successful education, but it doesn't guarantee an efficient life or the development of autonomy among children. The challenges met in education request beside the results of children an attention on children's well-being. Constructing positive relationships at all levels between teachers, children, and parents should be a priority in the educational system, since the knowledge is created between interactions, in a relational process (Gergen, 2015). Unfortunately, there is less emphasis on creating interactions, the focus being on students' performance, on their capacity to reproduce what teachers are teaching. Students are often punished for their results either by teachers, family or they are stigmatized by their colleagues. Along these arguments, the paper introduces the relational evaluation (Gergen, 2009; 2015) empathizing the process of constructing knowledge through relationships. The concern is on collaboration, on the qualitative relationships between teachers and students, on what is happening in classroom. Within this process children should be part as active participants, and their voices should be integrated in school decision-making.

Challenges of traditional evaluation

In traditional education the focus in on educating the students. As a result, the teaching practices are focusing on individual, through private readings or homework, the children being evaluating depending on the information they succeed to memorize. In this way, students are learning the dependence of authority, linear thinking, social apathy, and passive involvement (Sirotnik, 1983). The experts establish what curriculum pupils should learn, what is good or not, the voice of children missing almost completely from school culture. Unfortunately, these practices don't

motivate children to participate in school activities, to be curious or to be excited about going and spending time to school.

The traditional system of education from Romania has constantly been under a significantly pressure due to the poor PISA results of the students compared to other students from different countries (Bădescu, 2019). The general results obtained in 2018 were under those from 2015, and those from 2015 were under the results obtained in 2012. These results highlight the fact that 41% among Romanian pupils cannot understand the significance of a text of medium complexity, and 44% of children aren't able to apply in daily life the scientific information. All these children are in a situation of major educational vulnerability. Beside the problem of the results alongside the development of competences, another major challenge is school dropout. During 2019-2020, 1.3% of children from primary and gymnasium level abandoned the school, this reality being more present in rural areas (Minister of Education, 2022). The impact of this negative development regarding the functional illiteracy and the school dropout indicates the gaps of the educational process in relation to skills required on the labour market. This fact will have a huge consequence on the crises of socio-professional capacities of citizens regarding the labour crisis in Romania (Kiss, 2022). In this regard, it is important to bring into discussion the main factors that lead to the vulnerability among children: the parental education, the quality of teaching, and how educational resources are allocated and used. Often, the vulnerable children confront with social exclusion, discrimination, with lower chances to have access to equal opportunities, but also with anxiety and depression. Ensuring the well-being in schools should be a priority in educational process (Konu & Rimpelä, 2002). The question that we can address refers to how the pedagogical practices can become more participatory and collaborative to enhance school participation? The emphasis should be on the participatory processes to construct meaning and inspiration. When we place the relational process in the foreground we are making room for a major change within educational system.

Research methodology

The paper highlights the perspectives of children concerning the impact of evaluation on children's well-being. The grounded theory strategy was used in order to explore the perceptions of children and their experiences in relation to the evaluation process. Children from Iasi County were invited to express and share their feelings. Four focus groups were

organized, and the drawing technique was used as a starting point to moderate the discussions.

Participants

Five schools from rural area were invited to participate in this research, but only three schools accepted the invitation due to the restrictions of Covid-19 pandemic. In this line, four focus groups were conducted between November and December 2020, gathering a total of 21 children aged between 12 and 14 years old. The number of participants regarding the focus groups varied between three participants and seven participants. The main selection criteria were as follows: the desire and the availability of the children to participate, age between 12 and 16 years old, children who have passed through school tests, exams (also in online context), children from rural areas, children who experience difficulties in managing the school challenges. The characteristics of the participants are presented below:

Respondent code	Age	Gender	Grade	Moderation period and context
S1	12 years old	male	5th grade	November 2020, online (via ZOOM platform)
S2	12 years old	male		
S3	13 years old	female		
S4	12 years old	female		
S5	12 years old	male		

Table 1. Characteristics of participants included in focus group no. 1

Respondent code	Age	Gender	Grade	Moderation period and context
S1	12 years old	male	6th grade	November 2020, online (via ZOOM platform)
S2	12 years old	male		
S3	12 years old	male		
S4	12 years old	male		
S5	12 years old	male		
S6	12 years old	male		
S7	12 years old	male		

Table 2. Characteristics of participants included in focus group no. 2

Respondent code	Age	Gender	Grade	Moderation period and context
S1	14 years old	male	7th grade	November 2020, online (via ZOOM platform)
S2	14 years old	female		
S3	14 years old	female		
S4	14 years old	female		
S5	14 years old	female		
S6	14 years old	female		

Table 3. Characteristics of participants included in focus group no. 3

Respondent code	Age	Gender	grade	Moderation period and context
S1	14 years old	male	8th grade	December 2020, physical interaction
S2	12 years old	male	6th grade	
S3	12 years old	male	6th grade	

Table 4. Characteristics of participants included in focus group no. 4

Data analysis

The challenges imposed by the pandemic context made possible to organize three focus groups online via ZOOM platform, and one focus group *face to face*. As a main steps in processing and analyzing the data collected initial and focused coding were used, followed by the memo-writing and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). In order to get the main categories, NVivo 11 Pro software allowed to have an overview of the collected data and to observe the particularities, making constant comparisons between data, to group and to sort the codes. The main categories brought into discussion by children are summarized below.

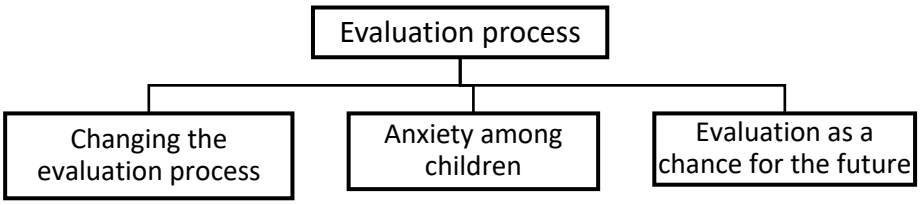


Fig. 1 *Main categories regarding the evaluation process from children's perspectives*

Ethical considerations

To organize the meetings with the children, ethical considerations have been applied. Before the focus groups, the parents and the children were informed about their participation, and they were asked for their consent. The parents received the informed consent, a document that explained the whole process, the purpose of the research, the steps of the research, and how the data analysis will take place. The teachers from schools who facilitated the process of children's participation were informed and they received a consent form, too. Concerning the involvement of the children in this research (Graham, et al., 2013), children were treated equally, and their opinions were respected and valued. Also, all the measures have been taken so that children feel safe and encouraged to express their points of views (the conditions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, children were informed about the withdrawing possibility without any consequences, where necessary sensitive topic weren't developed, the atmosphere was positive, and the children felt free to share their experiences). In the research analysis, the anonymity of the respondents is respected, each child's testimony being associated with a respondent code.

Results

The results demonstrate the need for improving the evaluation process including children's voice and propose the educational evaluation from a relational perspective. These results present children's perspectives and experiences on this important topic emphasizing how pupils can be engaged in a meaningful learning. The experiences of the children contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of the evaluation on children's participation and propose the evaluation from a relational perspective: *evaluation as a complex emotional experience*, *as a way to create relationships* and *evaluation as a chance to different opportunities*.

Changing the evaluation process

The perspectives of children that took part to this research bring into discussion the fact that the way children are evaluated in classroom should be changed. The evaluation of children is more focused on their capacity to memorize the information, and not on their skills as problem solving, critical thinking or emotional intelligence. The pupils believe that within the learning process the results that they achieve do not demonstrate their full potential, as the grades are not the most important aspect.

"I would like to change the way we are evaluated. The grades shouldn't matter so much. The grades show our capacity to memorize the information, but this practice doesn't define our potential". S3, 14 years old, focus group 3, Iasi County

Children appreciate when evaluation takes into consideration multiple activities. The focus is on how children work in different situations, and in this way, children are evaluated from different angles. The efforts that children undertake are concretized into a final grade.

"*The way our teacher is evaluated us is very good. We have some tests during semester, some homework, different activities in classes. Our teacher takes all these things into account." S5, 14 years old, focus group 3, Iasi County*

From children's perspectives, the evaluation should take into consideration each step in the process of learning. Children are thinking that it is important to consider all the activities, not only the final test. In this way, children would feel less effort in gaining knowledge, and they would find more joy. Pupils believe that their assessment should be gradually, and each activity should be valued. They appreciate the teachers that already implement this way of assessment.

"Each effort should count, piece by piece, each answer that we give in classroom…In this way at the final of our semester we realize that we gained a lot without feeling that we make a great effort, and it is more fun. Our teacher is very good, and she is practicing this method"… S4, 14 years old, focus group 3, Iasi, County

Spending time on online classes is seen as a difficult task for many children, especially because they have a lot of tests and online listening. From children's point of view, turning on the web camera seems inappropriate, and it creates discomfort. Pupils believe that this grading process of evaluation should be replaced with more projects and practical activities for them.

"If we still have to participate in online classes, I will remove the issue of absences if you can't be present, the idea of tests and online listening. I will add more projects to be graded, it seems to me that at least in this way we relieve some of the stress. I would give up the idea that students have to turn their cameras on, not everyone feels comfortable…" S6, 14 years old, focus group 3, Iasi County

Anxiety among children

Online school is a new challenge in children's lives, and this fact generates stress on them. Changes that happen in the period of adolescence

influence children's vulnerability and the risk depression (Ashcraft, 2002). School performance and learning skills are closely related to children's well-being (Rabian & Silverman, 2000). Anxious children tend to have weak results, and they are more likely to adopt unhealthy behavior (Ashcraft, 2002). Anxiety is one of the most common emotional problems encountered among children and adolescents. Children who often experiences anxiety are less involved in school activities, they develop less friendships, have a lower self-esteem and less trust in their own strengths (Racu, 2011). Evaluation creates fears and anxiety among children. When pupils have to do with the evaluation process, a lot of them are facing with negative emotions. These emotions affect children when they must take school tests. Children don't know how to manage their feelings, and in many cases, they can't concentrate very well, this affecting their grades. Even they are feeling discomfort, children agree that they must learn to achieve useful information.

"It is better to learn, even if you feel bad when you give a test. During the exams I don't feel very good, I feel pain in my stomach, my head starts to hurt, and that's why I take bad grades sometimes…but I know that it is important to achieve some information…" S3, 12 years, focus group 4, Iasi County.

Activities request children a constantly effort and emphasize the multiple of exercises ever after finishing the school program. Children find very difficult the activities that they have to do at home which is the part of the children's assessment. Thus, children recommend less exercises and other evaluation criteria.

"I think it will be better if we would receive less homework, in every day we have twelve or thirteen exercises... It is very tired for us, I think our teachers should find other ways to evaluate us…" S2, 12 years old, focus group 4, Iasi County

As we known the new realities generated by Covid-19 pandemic stopped the collective activities, children started to feel alone, and they didn't have the opportunity to see their friends, and their teachers (UNICEF, 2020). The increase of anxiety among children is amplified by the school demands, by the technical issues during the online lessons, and also by the family context. Children perceive online school as being exhausted, with too many tasks, an environment which deprives them of freedom and affects their health.

"Too much homework to be done…it affects us. When I say school, I am thinking about prison…" S2, 12 years old, focus group 2, Iasi County

A good education should give children confidence and also to highlight the importance of knowledge. School for some children becomes the main resource for achieving a better future. Not all the children have financial possibilities, and the school dropout rate is highest among vulnerable children (UNICEF, 2020). Children need a health environment to develop their social and emotional skills, to be able to express themselves. At the end of the studies, students should own the appropriate knowledge to manifest their autonomy, thus becoming independent. The entire educational system should allow children to efficiently act in society, to develop a critical thinking and to bring a contribution to the society (Gergen, 2009). For most of the children, the school experiences tend to be more negatively, and the entire educational path is associated with a wall strewn with many obstacles. The main concern of the children is related to the completion of the studies. They find this a cumbersome process, full of obstacles. Online teaching methods aren't efficiently for the students, children being very bored and exhausted at the end of the studies. In the image below from the bottom to the top are mentioned the next words: *school, exams, high-school, baccalaureate, foreign languages, faculty, master, courses.*



Fig.2 *Graphic representation regarding the educational path*

"In this imagine I represent through a staircase all the obstacles that we encounter at school: exams, courses…The imagine represents a wall, we are hitting the walls for finishing our studies. We are very tired, bored…and this experience I expressed it through a wall…" S3, 13 years old, focus group 1, Iasi County

In face of external challenges, as Covid-19 pandemic, online courses represent a temporally solution to continue the school. This experience brings children fear of failure, anxiety and distrust. Considering the purpose of the education, school should offer children different opportunities to grow, to allow children to have positive reactions, developing healthy behaviors and attitudes. The way children perceive difficult experiences is an indicator of the effectiveness of the educational system. Dealing with risk factors, children react negatively, and their experiences request the necessity of resilience skills. Resilience is vital during adversity situations, a significance concept that helps children to go through difficult situations more easily. The significance of school online is associated with the lack of freedom for children. Pupils see this period as an obstacle that affects their future. Below, in the colored image are mentioned the next words: *entrance, school, prison*, and on the white space is mentioned *broken future.*

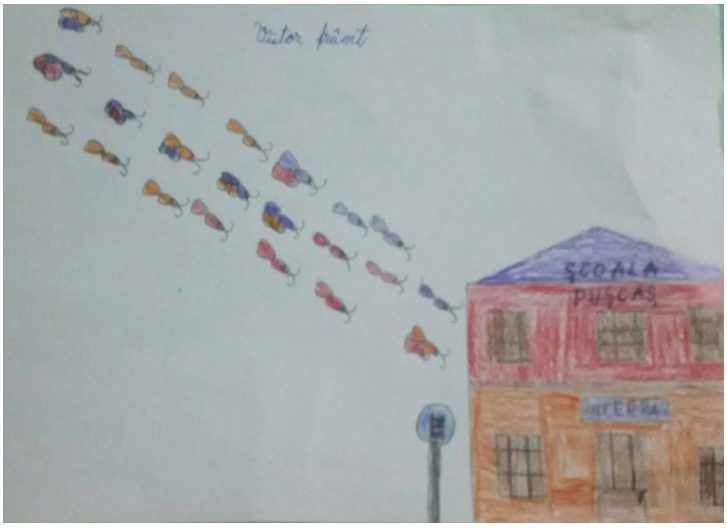


Fig. 3 *Graphic representation - Children's perceptions regarding school*

"I this period we can't go to school, online school is like a prison, we have a broken future if we are continuing in this way…" S1, 12 years old, focus group 2, Iasi County

Language plays an important role and has a significant impact on children's self-confidence, self-esteem or interpersonal skills. Language generates ideas that contribute to new knowledge, but it also has the power to negatively influence behavior that can lead to demotivation. How we speak and what words we use will shape our future (Gergen, 2009). From a constructionist perspective, language is not a representation, but a call for action (Gergen, 2015). The social realities are thus constructed through language, and the way we describe and explain what we live has an impact on our actions. Some scholars support the idea that the success in adversity conditions isn't only related to individual factors, but also to external factors, related to the social environment. The qualities of the children are necessarily, but not sufficient for resilience, as they are the result of a social context (Luthar, 2006). For children that graduate during Covid-19 pandemic, online school is represented as a negative experience. Children's interpretations lead more to failure, to anxiety and to stress. Their significance denotes distrust in the way of teaching, in the support they receive from school. The main concern of children is directed towards completing their studies, and the way online classes are currently conducted doesn't give them security or confidence that they will be able to pass all the exams. In the representation below we find the next words: *I will fail, I am scared, I am not prepared for the high school.*

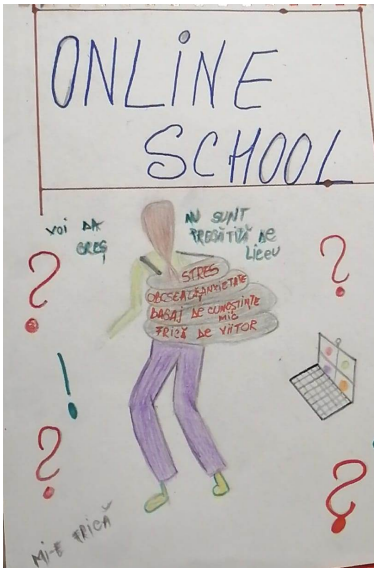


Fig. 4 *Graphic representation considering the impact of online school*

"Online school makes me sad, we afraid of exams, we aren't so active in online classes. I don't know how we will get to the high school. There is a lot of stress, and I think I will fail…" S4, 14 years old, focus group 3, Iasi County

Evaluation as a chance for the future

Pupils believe that self-confidence is vital for their future objectives. In this process, language has an important role, and the words that they are using within evaluation process will influence children's results. From children's perspectives a positive language will always be helpful and will contribute to their personal development even if the grades obtained after the evaluation aren't as they expected to be.

"*We can achieve our objectives if we believe in ourselves, even if we sometimes achieve bad grades…I think it is very important how teachers tell us the feedback…positive words help us to move forward…" S2, 12 years old, focus group 1, Iasi County.*

Children strive for a better live and believe that they have the ability to achieve their goals as long as they dedicate themselves to learning. The process of assessment that children have to pass is often seen as a necessarily one in order to achieve their goals. School becomes a real resource which give them the opportunity to do interesting things and to have a chance for the future.

"I would like to become a lawyer…and for this opportunity I have to take good marks. I like to communicate to people, and to solve problems…School helps us very much….you can do a lot of interesting thinks, but you have to pass all the exams." S4, 14 years old, focus group 3, Iasi County

Relational evaluation

Evaluation practices related by children underline the excessive emphasis on tests and grades. The traditional assessment subverts the relating process on which education depends (Gill & Gergen, 2020). Teachers and students are facing more and more challenges regarding the process of evaluation (Gill & Gergen, 2020). While aiming the institutional responsibility and the increasing of the educational standards, the evaluation system based on measurement starts to be unproductive for children, but also for the teachers (Gill & Gergen, 2020). This way, children lose their motivation to get involved, and the results that children get, start slowly to be the purpose of the education. The pressure on achieving good grades has a negative impact on children's mental health, and often it has been ignored. These effects of the standardized education are present among the criticism of the contemporary education (Gill & Gergen, 2020). No doubt that the

process of learning also implies evaluation, but the question is how the process of evaluation could help children to be more motivated to learn as well as to contribute to the well-being of students and teachers. If we bring into discussion the constructionist approach (Gergen, 2015; McNamee, 2015) we observe that social constructionism proposes an alternative approach of evaluation. So, the evaluation according to social constructionism emphasizes the relational process in education (McNamee, 2015). The traditional evaluation is replaced with an appreciative approach, encouraging opportunities and multiple possibilities for children's well-being. The attention is on the valuable aspects of the activities and on the experiences that aim to improve relationships. The key actors that are involved in the process of evaluation constantly participate and express their points of view. Thus, the evaluation arises from the generative relationships among those who evaluate and those whose activities are being evaluated (Gill & Gergen, 2020). Appreciating the potentialities, the possibilities for growth and the well-being of children, the paper proposes the evaluation from a relational perspective: evaluation as a complex emotional experience, as a way to create relationships and evaluation as a chance to different opportunities.

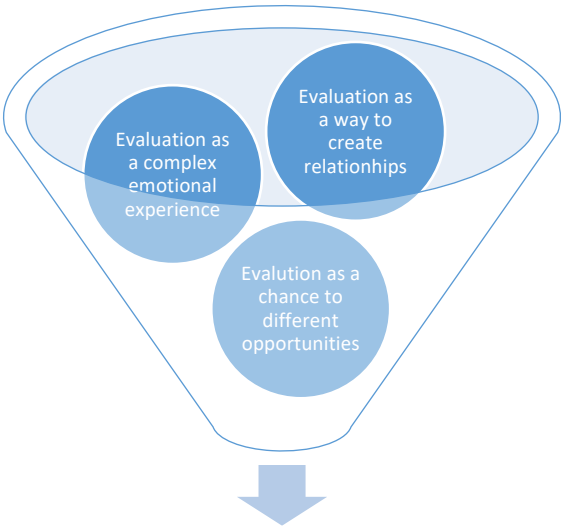


Fig. 5 *Experiencing evaluation from a relational perspective (author's own contribution)*

Evaluation as a complex emotional experience brings into discussion the multifaced feelings that children face during lessons, examens or tests. As we could see, children experience anxiety, fear, and mistrust in the educational system, in teachers but also in their own capacities to deal with new challenges (Brown et al., 2018). School should be a place where curiosity, enthusiasm and inspiration are present in students' life. It is widely known that fear limits and stifles the creativity of children. A relational orientation of evaluation can enhance the relational well-being (Gill & Gergen, 2020). Relational evaluation is concentrated on collaborative process, being opposed to measurement. It considers the students' enthusiasm and exciting, it invites to appreciation and to a mutual care (Mao, 2020). Relational evaluation can contribute to build trust between students and teachers. In a collaborative way students can become more confident to handle with uncertainty and stress.

Evaluation as a way to create relationships emphasizes the collaboration and the collaborative evaluation. Evaluation is seen as a way to build connections between students and students, students and teachers, underlining the importance of dialogue. This means that the focus is on conversations, and less on the grades that students can achieve. Dialogue can nurture the interest and the curiosity on students and their enthusiasm to learn (Gill & Gergen, 2020). The focus is to create meaningful ways that can offer support to each other. Working together students and teachers can contribute to the engagement in the learning process. The purpose is on the pathways that are emerging from learning, and not necessarily on the students' grades.

Evaluation as a chance to different opportunities creates space for children to express themselves, to be open to criticism, to move forward to meaningful actions that will enhance students to multiple learning adventures. A relational approach of evaluation will encourage the continued participation in learning. Such a perspective of dialogue will help students to achieve their long-term objectives, their aspirations and dreams. Learning becomes a meaningful aspect of students' life path, and the evaluative process provides support for the emerging opportunities (Gill & Gergen, 2020). Thus, relational evaluation inspires students to be accountable for their personal development and well-being.

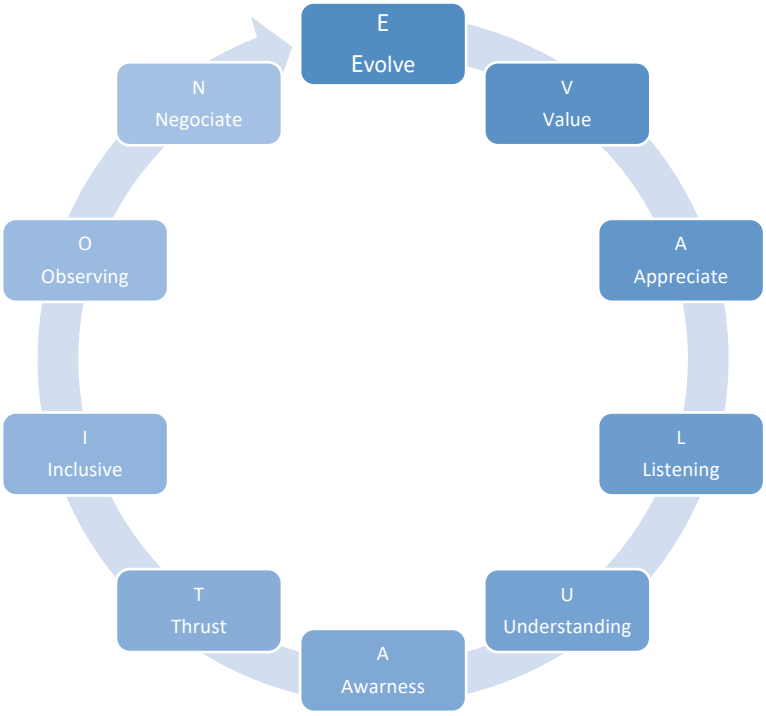


Fig. 6 *EVALUATION as a relational process for promoting children's voice in decision-making (author's own contribution)*

Key actions	Reflection Questions
Evolve	How can evaluation contribute to children's well-being?
Value	What do we value within an evaluation process? How important are children in this process?
Appreciate	What we appreciate within the evaluation process?
Listening	Where is the voice of children within the evaluation process?
Understanding	How children understand the evaluation?
Awareness	What impact does evaluation have on children's well-being?
Thrust	How trustful is the process of evaluation for children?
Inclusive	How inclusive is the evaluation?
Observation	How can we integrate observation as a way to evaluate children?
Negotiate	How can we create space for children to be involved within the negotiation of decision-making evaluation?

Table 5. *Key actions for evaluation as a relational process (author's own contribution)*

Experiencing evaluation from a relational perspective emphasizes the dialogue and the collaboration between students and teachers. Therefore, the paper proposes a relational evaluation based on children's voices and promotes a positive experience of learning. These aims of evaluation lead to specific questions that enrich the evaluation process and empower children's potential. The key actions that are detailed in the image above are accompanied by questions that prioritize and promote children's voice in the decision-making process regarding evaluation. The purpose of the questions is to invite to actions that allow pupils to be engaged in a meaningful learning.

Conclusions and further directions

Concerning the educational changes and transformation, the paper introduces a different approach to the standardized education. Starting from a social constructionist point of view, the paper underlines the relational perspective of evaluation process (Gill & Gergen, 2020). The focus is on creating more meaningful relationships between teachers and pupils, pupils and pupils, emphasizing the continued participation in learning. Experiencing evaluation from a relational perspective contributes to increasing enthusiasm and the curiosity among children. Following the children's experiences and perceptions, the paper proposes a relational perspective of evaluation: evaluation as a complex emotional experience, as a way to create relationships, as a chance to different opportunities. The purpose is to inspire children to thrive and to discover the beautiful sides of learning. Also, the paper highlights the importance of children's voice in rethinking the process of evaluation. Engaging children in conversations and specific actions can develop the sense of belonging, responsibility and motivation of pupils. Extended from the national level to international level, the relational perspective could change the way children are seeing within the educational process. The educational decisions should integrate and promote children's voices, which is very rarely considered or even marginalized. Finally, the relational approach of evaluation may be a significant strategy in order to reduce school dropout and to enhance school participation.

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