

The Impact of Summative Assessment on Students' Social and Emotional Learning in Moroccan Public Secondary Schools

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Abstract. Despite many reforms to promote education quality in Morocco, assessment methods still target results and performances rather than competencies' development. Educational policies have always been concerned with school and students' performances based on summative assessment and standardized test results. The school's mission is not limited to instruction and grades. The 21st century school needs to meet students' psychological needs and to provide empowering learning environments. In this context, current assessment policies in Moroccan schools are based on making judgments targeting students' results rather than the acquired competencies. Assessing students has become a compulsory practice that provides teachers and administration with grades and numbers void of meaning. However, assessment approaches have to challenge teachers' conventional perceptions of assessment and create a free anxiety learning atmosphere. Assessment should be considered as a dynamic process implemented in a learner-centered environment that supports students' social and emotional empowerment. In this perspective, this article discusses the impact of school grades on students' engagement and motivation as well as on their social and emotional learning through a quantitative study conducted among 1080 students in public secondary schools in order to reveal this impact and to shed light on the benefits of interactive and dynamic assessment in a social and emotional healthy setting. The study also analyzes secondary school teachers' perceptions of summative assessment and grades.

Key words: summative assessment, secondary schools, social and emotional learning, impact

Introduction

Recently, neuroscience underlines the importance of the learning atmosphere and the social environment where learning takes place. Many studies show that *“social and emotional learning programs pave the way for better academic learning. They teach children social and emotional skills that are intimately linked with cognitive development”* (Zins, 2004). An adequate learning environment enhances students' motivation, engagement, concentration and their desire to learn. *“Schools are social places and learning is a social process. Students do not learn alone but rather in collaboration with their teachers”* (Zins, 2004). Within this social constructivist context, social and emotional education includes many items to be taught to students such as self-awareness, self-management and decision-making strategies. In recent researches several definitions are attributed to SEL programs (Social and Emotional Learning) in order to provide a conceptual framework to coordinate approaches *“that promote positive school climates and cultures, and enhance students' intrapersonal, interpersonal, and*

cognitive competence” (Weissberg & Durlak, 2015). This definition sets the evidence base for SEL programs through many findings that stress the core purposes of education in order to ensure “*that all students attain mastery in all academic subjects and become culturally literate, intellectually reflective and lifelong learners*” (Weissberg & Durlak, 2015). SEL programs allow students to interact in skilled and respectful ways as family members and within school communities. The 21st school is invited to provide more than academic instruction to prepare students for life and work. In this context, education staff and stakeholders face major challenges related to students’ diverse backgrounds including multicultural and multilingual groups that might lead to risky behaviors such as violence and bullying, and mental health difficulties in addition to social-emotional competence deficits that affect negatively academic performance. This academic achievement can be easily affected by assessment approaches and modes through grades and the pressure of exams and standardized tests that do not take SEL programs into consideration.

Literature Review

Educational reforms in many countries have involved assessment modes attempting to improve students’ academic achievement. Though reforms in assessment approaches might bring about some positive effects, *‘the overall effects of assessment-based reforms are often contested, and negative consequences of large-scale tests used for accountability clearly exist’* (Andrade & Cizek, 2010). In this context, *‘assessment is a term that covers any activity in which evidence of learning is collected in a planned and systematic way and is used to make a judgment about learning’ and aims at making decisions about how to advance learning. ‘A summative assessment is administered at the end of some units of instruction that aims at categorizing the performance of a student or a system’* (Harlen & Crick, 2002). *‘It summarizes the learning that has taken place in order to grade, certificate or record progress’*. This requires minimum competency testing, teacher competency testing and high school graduation tests. Summative assessment has long been questioned about its efficiency.

‘Proponents claim that tests cause students, as well as teachers and schools, to put more efforts into their work on account of the rewards and penalties that can be applied on the basis of the results of tests. In opposition to these arguments is the claim that increase in scores is mainly the consequence of familiarization with the tests and of teaching directed specifically towards answering the questions, rather than developing the skills and knowledge intended in the curriculum’ (Harlen & Crick, 2002). Based on this perception of assessment, many educational systems have recently underlined the impact of summative assessment and testing on students’ motivation for learning. Within this perspective, *‘Motivation is a complex concept concerned with the drive, incentive or energy to do something. Motivation is not a single entity but embraces, for example, effort, self-efficacy, self-regulation, interest, locus of control, self-esteem, goal orientation and learning disposition’* (Harlen & Crick, 2002). Motivation is a key concept in creating a free-anxiety environment and enhancing students’ desire to learn and progress.

Test Anxiety and School Performance

Test anxiety is defined in International Encyclopedia of Education as *“the negative effect, worry, physiological arousal and behavioral responses that accompany concern about failure or lack of competence on an exam or similar evaluative situation”* (Ventura & Zeidner, 2010). Other definitions are attributed to test anxiety. According to Berk and Nanda (2006), test anxiety *“refers to transitory apprehensive, uneasy or nervous feelings immediately before, during and after taking a specific test”*. Test anxiety was traditionally referred to as emotionality and worry (Cassady & Johnson, 2002). Emotionality includes physiological responses that some students experience during periods of assessment. These manifestations

can be reflected through feelings of panic, heart rate, nausea, which cause uneasiness to the individual. This impact can affect students' cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions. The second factor is "worry" identified as "*any cognitive expression of concern about one's own performance*" including procrastination and avoidance (Santana & Eccius-Wellmann, 2018). When emotionality is associated with high levels of worry, students' performance can be highly affected. Research underlines that high levels of emotionality can be managed by students in exam situation if they maintain a high level of self-confidence. In the same perspective, test anxiety is defined in terms of behavior modification that can lead to test anxiety when emotionality is targeted. Within this context, the correlation between anxiety and achievement has been debated in several studies. Available data reveals that low-ability students are more concerned with this effect than high-ability students. In addition, task difficulty can increase the effect of test anxiety. This conclusion is supported by other authors who have conducted a study on a sample of 187 students to analyze the relationship between test anxiety and academic performance. The outcome of the study shows a significant and negative effect mainly on low-achiever students versus students with academic achievement. Similarly, other researches have concluded that fear and test anxiety affect performance. The fear can be related to fear of failure when students poorly perform on exams or the fear to disappoint parents, teachers or themselves, which can lead to fear of judgement and the excessive worry about test results and grades. Thus, the experienced fear affects students' cognitive abilities, which compromises their working memory, reduces problem-solving abilities and diminishes information retrieval. In this context, girls are more concerned with test anxiety than boys (Harlen & Crick, 2002). This difference may be attributed to many factors such as gender stereotypes, differences in coping mechanisms and societal expectations (Konwar, Sarma, & Ojah, 2023). Some studies report that parental expectations can be an important source of test anxiety while others argue that females tend to feel more pressure to achieve academic success (Santana & Eccius-Wellmann, 2018). This brief overview on the impact of test anxiety on academic achievement calls for urgent intervention strategies to address anxiety through implementing SEL programs and stress management techniques.

Reduce Test Anxiety through SEL Programs

SEL refers to social and emotional learning defined in literature as emotional skills, interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities, noncognitive skills, soft skills and behavioral skills (Getty, Barron, & Hulleman, 2021). They also encompass '*effort, critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, effective communication, motivation and persistence*'. This involves '*fostering social and emotional competencies through explicit instruction and through student-centered learning approaches that help students engage in the learning process and develop analytical communication and collaborative skills*' (Getty, Barron, & Hulleman, 2021). These competencies are believed to affect positively academic achievement and success. A framework for SEL programming includes 5 competencies:

- Self-awareness competency which helps students to understand their emotions, their strengths and their limitations and to develop the ability to comprehend the relationship between feelings and thoughts, and actions.
- Self-management competence which allows students to manage stress, control impulses and overcome barriers to achieve goals.
- Social awareness competence helps students to understand social norms and to sympathize with different social backgrounds and behaviors.
- Relationship skills allow students to develop communication skills and active listening competences, to maintain healthy relationships and to cooperate.
- Decision-making skills include the ability to make constructive choices and to make realistic evaluation of consequences of made actions.

In addition to SEL programs, many interventions at the school level aim at creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment in order to address students' anxiety (Konwar, Sarma, & Ojah, 2023). School staff can schedule stress reduction programs and promote positive school climate. They can offer constructive feedback avoiding judgments and sanctions; and encourage peer collaboration to create a supportive environment to share students' feelings of stress and anxiety. Within this context, SEL contributes in fostering positive social relationships. Moreover, school can collaborate with mental health professionals in order to identify and provide support for anxious students through reframing negative thoughts, learning to set realistic goals and using relaxation techniques. They can also learn to promote their self-regulation skills and shift from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset in order to reduce fear of failure. Therefore, social and emotional learning programs can help students to build resilience and ability to challenge difficulties and maintain effort and interest.

The Relationship between Assessment and Motivation

Many studies in education have dealt with the relationship between assessment and motivation. Formative assessment plays a significant role in enhancing students' motivation and shaping their learning behaviors, their engagement, their understanding of how they learn and take control of their own learning (Black & William, 1998). The impact of assessment is clearly understood when dealing primarily with types of motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to students' internal desire to learn guided by interest and curiosity. In this context, formative assessment based on positive feedback can improve intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is governed by external rewards such as encouragement through praising and grades or judgment through punishment and sanction. In high-stake assessments and standardized tests, students are more concerned with their results than their progress in the learning process. They are usually motivated during formative assessments which provide opportunities for self-regulation, encourage reflection and get positive feedback from teachers. In this type of assessment for learning, assessment becomes a part of the learning process which orients students in their progress and boosts their learning autonomy. The second context is assessment of learning which tends to measure what students know at the end of the learning process. It promotes performance-oriented goals with focus on grades.

Assessment purposes rely on exams

Assessments in education usually rely on exams to determine students' level of knowledge or proficiency. They are administered to measure skills, competencies in different subjects. Tests can be standardized and aim at evaluating students equally with the same instructions and rubrics in the same conditions. The primary goal of assessment is measurement of students' performances. The choice of test items has to guarantee objectivity and reduce the potential for subjective bias in grading (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Malouff & Thorsteinsson, 2016). The focus on grades to rank students' results often reduces their motivation for learning. Similarly, the clarification of assessment criteria for students allows them to develop high levels of skills, self-efficacy and to improve their competencies in problem-solving techniques. This fact tends to reduce their motivation which is negatively affected by social comparison. Teachers as well as administration staff tend to compare publicly students' results with their peers, which affects their self-esteem. Therefore, assessment becomes *'an attempt to control rather than to inform about students' learning progress and their personal efforts and engagement to be responsible learners'* (Grolnick & Ryan's, 1987).

Impact of assessment on students' motivation

The impact of assessment on teachers and students has been debated by many researchers. Assessment affects *"self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation and attribution of success or failure"* (Harlen & Crick, 2002). Positive assessment can help students to focus on their learning. It promotes their mindsets growth, offers opportunities for students' reflection and

creates a more supportive learning environment. However, the current assessment methods increase test anxiety and negative effects on achievement that could be attained through avoiding comparisons between students and the use of letters and grades to rank performances and results. The teaching-learning process is oriented towards students' performance goals (Harlen & Crick, 2002). The negative impact of assessment on students affects deeply their motivation for learning, their self-esteem and their perceptions of themselves as learners. The concept of motivation in education is a key concept that has been debated in many studies. Students' motivation is proved to enhance their desire for learning and for long life learning. Motivation includes many psychosocial factors that contribute in creating adequate social and natural environment.

Impact of summative assessment on students' social and emotional learning

Evidence from recent researches underlines the impact of summative assessment on students' social and emotional learning. Students' perception of summative assessments is associated to grades and certification or it simply means success or failure. Schools that claim to adopt a social constructivist approach in the teaching-learning process need to provide a healthy climate for the implementation of SEL programs. Learning takes place when students interact within groups, which allows them to develop behavioral skills and social and emotional intelligence. However, the current assessment modes in many educational systems are more likely to focus on summative assessment than formative assessment. Thus, students as well as schools are ranked in terms of performance and results based on summative assessment and standardized tests. Based on this perceptions, summative assessment is given a function of judgement and sanction, which affects negatively the school learning atmosphere and raises students' stress and anxiety. Implementing SEL programs in schools according to many researchers requires developing new types of assessments in order to provide measures for different abilities that constitute the five SEL domains including the skills and attitudes. In this context, *'Assessment of multiple social-emotional competencies would help to determine which types of interventions would be most beneficial for which students, and for monitoring students' progress over time in order to make adjustment in the type or pacing of programming, and to judge how well an intervention promotes its targeted skills'* (Weissberg & Durlak, 2015).

Problem Statement

The present study discusses with the impact of summative assessment on students' social and emotional learning. The teaching-learning process is expected to provide a free anxiety atmosphere in order to enhance students' motivation and desire for learning and to encourage long life learning. In this context, assessment approaches target results and performances rather than competencies' development.

Context of the Study

Moroccan educational system has witnessed many reforms since the independence. However, these reforms did not bring about positive changes related to assessment modes and approaches. Assessment practices still adopt judgment and sanction functions and are oriented towards results and performances as tools to rank students as well as schools. Thus, teachers and students are faced with summative assessment procedures (challenging assignments, busy schedule, social pressure) that favor grades over regular constructive and positive feedback. For instance, Regional and National Baccalaureate Exams are a source of stress and anxiety that often affect students' performances on exam periods. In addition, stressed school environment reduces students' motivation, which affects their social and emotional learning and impacts negatively their desire for long life learning. Within this perspective, assessment reforms need to focus more on assessment as a process favoring positive and regular feedback.

The objective of this paper is to analyze teachers' and students' perceptions of summative assessment and the impact of grades on students' motivation as well as on their social and emotional learning.

Scope of the Study

The target population of the study includes 516 teachers in public high schools and 1080 students in public high schools at the Souss Massa Regional Academy for Education and Training. The participants in the study supply valuable insights on the impact of summative assessment on students' social and emotional learning.

Methodology

The study adopts a quantitative approach. The online survey was conducted through two self-filling questionnaires which were constructed through google forms. The participants in the study were 516 respondents from public high schools and 1080 high school students belonging to many schools in Sous Massa Regional Academy. Data was collected through a google forms questionnaire which included demographic information, Likert scale items and a few open-ended questions that sought to analyze students' and teachers' perceptions of the impact of summative assessment as well as grades on students' motivation for learning and their academic success.

Results and Discussion

Students' Perception of Summative Assessment

The issue of assessment is now part of a wider debate that is seeking ways to reform schools. Assessment has become an area of controversy between *'those who swear by the quest for excellence and those who advocate the abolition of grades as an important measure to promote learning'*. In this sense, current forms of summative assessment in Moroccan public high schools such as the Regional Exam and the National Baccalaureate Exam *'are still a source of anxiety, it has become an exam that is no longer used for assessment or guidance'* (Scallon, 1998). Scallon points out that the sacredness of the Baccalaureate Exam means that this exam is immune to any real reform and immobilizes all assessment practices in the school environment. From this point of view, students give great importance to summative assessments, with 41,4% of students reporting a very strong impact of this type of assessment and 43.5% admit a relatively strong impact.

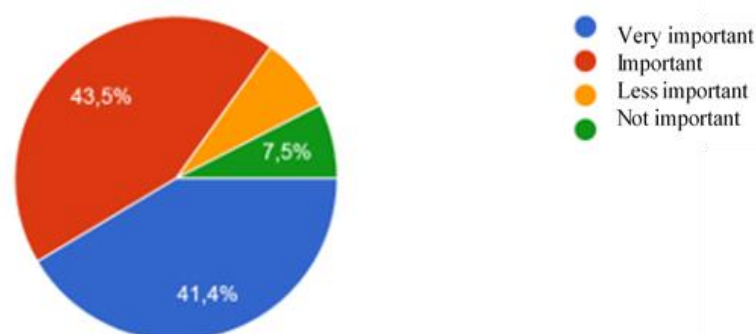


Figure 1. Impact of summative assessment on students

This impact is very strong when dealing with students' perceptions of grades. The figure below shows that more than 94% of students who have participated in the study admit that grades are of great importance to them mainly for second-year Baccalaureate students.

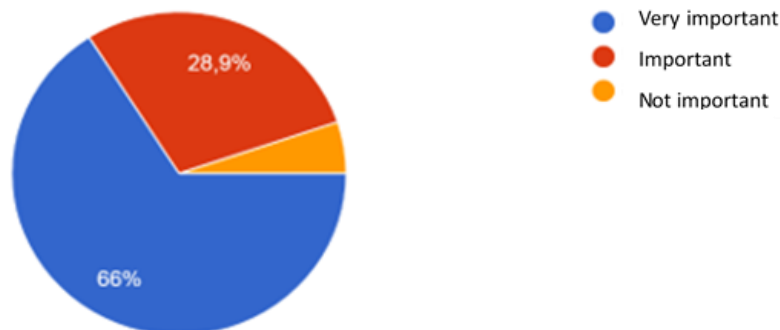


Figure 2. Students' perception of grades

Within the same context, parents also give great importance to their children's grades, as they can predict based on grades whether a child will succeed or fail at school. In this sense, Perrenoud (1995) states that grades are considered as indicators that everything at school is going well and that their children's education is following its right course, otherwise they can start to worry because lower grades mean simply failure. Parents require good grades so that their children can progress to the next level or get their Baccalaureate *'In the common imagination, from primary school to university, the school curriculum is evaluated by performance and results. Parents often ask questions about averages, keep an eye on their children's notebooks and expect the attributed grades to be fair'* (Perrenoud, 1995). According to Perrenoud, this presupposes that *"all students are assessed in the same way, under the same conditions, and that the grades correspond to the real level of excellence of each student, without being excessively strict"*. He added that *"the way in which grades are given, which varies from one teacher, one subject and one test to another, does not make summative assessment fair and reliable"*. Meanwhile, teachers have almost the same view.

Teachers' Perception of Grades

Assessment has long been a controversy that has been attributed many definitions according to educators and researchers in the education field. Assessment exams have heavy reliance on grades. Educators tend to rely on *"product criteria and describe what students know and are able to do at a particular point of time"*. *"Advocates of standards generally favor products criteria and base students' grades or reports on final examination scores (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). Grading was first adopted as a means to assess and provide feedback on student learning in order to communicate academic achievement. However, research reveals that traditional grading is a complex phenomenon due to the multifaceted nature of grades. The complexity of grading lies in the items that teachers chose to grade. Grading practices reflect teachers' beliefs and perceptions about education. Thus, they rely on their professional judgement and classroom experience to assign grades. In this context, many studies have shown that traditional grades are often subjective and with a high degree of variability that leads to questions about their reliability (Prukalski, 2024). These various factors have called for a reconsideration of how teachers assess and communicate learning. This attention drawn in recent research invites teachers to adopt standards-based grading which has proved to be effective showing thus a "higher correlation between students course grades and standardized*

test scores” (Pollio & Hochbein, 2015). This reform in grading remains a challenge to educators because teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of assessment and grades is central to the reform process. Moreover, teachers’ “*lack of professional training or education about grading generates confusion about the purpose of grades and forces them to rely on their experience to guide their practices*” (Prukalski, 2024). For most in-service teachers, grades attributed in summative assessments target certification and school results. Similarly, in Moroccan educational context, assessment is strongly linked to certification and school performance. The National Baccalaureate Exam which leads to a diploma is also considered as a tool for measuring the quality of a school, or even a procedure for assessing teaching practices. From this point of view, assessing students is closely related to evaluating an educational system. The ranking of public high schools in Morocco is based on National Baccalaureate Exam results. In other words, the performance of teachers, teaching approaches, schools or educational systems are measured by students’ results. Assessment thus becomes a source of comparison between schools, between student performance in the context of the PISA international assessments, and between all the components of the educational field. Therefore, the perceptions developed around grading urge for investigating teachers’ perceptions of grades in public high schools. within this perspective, responses of the participants in this study are very significant, as shown in the figure below.

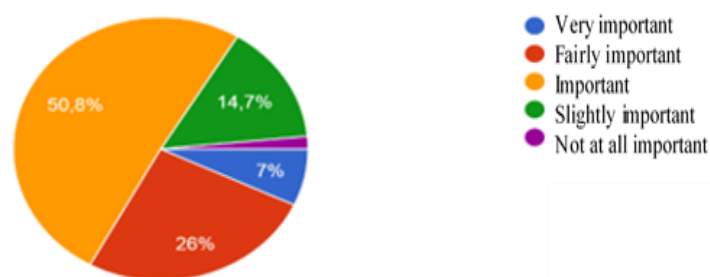


Figure 3. Teachers’ perceptions of grades

This figure reveals that 76.8% of respondents in public high schools report that grades do not reflect the real level of students. This point of view has been highlighted by several studies which demonstrate that grades are unreliable and misleading. Grades are not effective assessment tools but a means of communicating results about assessed tasks. The main problem in assessment is not that of grading, but the core question is how to collect and interpret the elements on which judgement is based. In this context, 7% of teachers in public secondary schools confirm that grades are the only means of quantifying students’ acquisitions.

Conclusion

The present paper provides results obtained from a quantitative study in which 1080 high school students participated to analyze the impact of summative assessment on their social and emotional learning. From the obtained results, the school environment where students are expected to interact socially and emotionally within a learner-centered context does not provide a free-anxiety and motivating atmosphere. Summative assessment periods are very stressing for students and the higher grades become a primary goal on behalf of competencies and skills’ acquisition. In this context, Gérard Scallon (1995) points out that skills are assessed by means of analytical checklists which provide dimensions of the task to be observed in order to be able to appreciate students’ progress. In the same context, he confirms that “*the numerical results*

are not judgements". Judgement is based on the interpretation of these results. In addition, when the teaching-learning process adopts a competency-based approach, assessment methods need to be adjusted to meet the expected requirements in order to make assessment motivating and instructive with regular personalized feedback.

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