

## ASSESSMENT AS A KEY ELEMENT IN THE PROCESS OF PURPOSE EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

Pilar Folgueiras<sup>2</sup>

Barbara Biglia<sup>3</sup>

Berta Palou<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Introduction

In a context of increasing complexity (Beck, 1992; Lyon, 1999; Bauman, 2005), facing the future seems to entail having to choose from among a wide range of possibilities, but options are normally limited by your own position in society. Additionally, in a society subject to major risks (Beck 2000), it is increasingly difficult to make definite, controlled plans for a personal and working life that become increasingly precarious (Biglia and Bonet, 2012), replacing the certainties and securities of the industrial society's models of emancipation and transition to adult life (Montiel Roig, 2007). Decision-making, as well as being dependent on the possibilities or limitations of the social context and individual characteristics, must not only be based on the skills of knowledge and know how, but also on a person's own feelings and emotions (Kidd, 1998; Pérez-Escoda, Filella, Bisquerra & Alegre, 2012). As the literature shows (Malin et al., 2014), moments of transition in one's life, and the process of creating an identity, play an important role in the configuration of purpose in young people (Bundick 2011, Palou, 2013).

In this sense, and understanding purpose as something that is constructed, it can and must be dealt with in the field of education. Purpose education is becoming a fundamental task, from both an academic and a personal/vocational point of view (Pizzolato, Brown & Kanny, 2011). This is not just help in making a choice, but rather a real act of empowerment and support, in which the best results can be achieved if young people are offered the necessary educational strategies (Bronk, 2011).

It is therefore necessary to promote educational strategies that help to support the development of purpose in both its individual and social aspects. *These educational strategies can range from activities and specific actions to more extensive projects, such as service-learning projects.* They can also be focused on a

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<sup>2</sup> University of Barcelona/UB. Department of Methods of Research and Diagnosis in Education. **E-mail:** pfolgueiras@ub.edu

<sup>3</sup> PhD in Psychology from the University of Barcelona. Psicologa. Departamento de Pedagogia, Universitat Rovira i Virgili (Tarragona/Spain). **E-mail:** barbara.biglia@urv.cat

<sup>4</sup> University of Barcelona/UB. Department of Methods of Research and Diagnosis in Education. **E-mail:** bertapalou@gmail.com

variety of topics related to purpose. For example, we find activities based on the construction of identity (Hill & Burrow, 2012), civic competences (Kiang, 2011, Barber, Mueller and Ogata, 2013), expectations (Alberts et al., 2006), career development (Mariano and Savage, 2009), etc.

On the other hand, aside from which educational strategies are selected to develop purpose, they must be assessed so as to validate, improve and optimise them. This will also make it possible to identify best practices that contribute to the development of purpose. *These pages are devoted to this task of assessment.*

## **2. How we can assess the educational strategies linked to the development of purpose in young people**

While the literature on the assessment of educational strategies aimed at developing purpose in young people is scarce, which makes sense if we bear in mind the fact that the studies, intervention actions, etc. on purpose are still in the initial phases (Bundick, 2011), we are able to find various research studies that assess the development of purpose<sup>5</sup>.

Focusing on the assessment of interventions, it is worth remembering that all educational interventions require assessment to be optimised and their results made known, uncommon as these interventions may be. The difficulties this entails are well known, particularly when the object being assessed (in our case, strategies to develop purpose) relates to issues as subjective and influenced by other variables as are emotions, expectations and roles, etc. (Pérez-Escoda; Filella; Bisquerra & Alegre, 2012). In addition, given its complexity, it is essential we not only assess but also reflect on what type of assessment will be most useful and necessary in evaluating the development of purpose in young people involved in actions, activities, projects, etc. with that goal.

### **2.1 Participatory and autonomous assessment: a proposal to assess interventions in the development of purpose**

When one delves into the subject of assessment, the first thing that becomes apparent is the large number of designs, models and approaches that exist for assessment (Patton, 1997; Escudero, 2006). Far from offering a systematisation of these models, and without ruling out the possibilities for use that they all might represent, depending on the aim and purpose of the assessment, this chapter begins making use of a *model of autonomous assessment* (Cabrera, 2007, 2010) that is also *participatory* (Martínez-Vivot and Folgueiras, 2015 Sandín, 1997, Úcar, 2014). This model, *which may be transferred to any context*, is based on the premise that any process of assessment is not linear but rather interacts with the reality in which it occurs, that it is not one-way but is a dialogue, that it is not closed but is open to the unpredictable, and that it is not rigid but rather

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in the research done by Kiang (2011), the development of purpose in young Americans of Asian origin is closely related to the feeling of family belonging. For their part, Shin et al. (2014) demonstrate how the search for purpose among Korean young people is related to individual achievements (wealth, material achievements, etc.) and that those who linked purpose with the social dimension showed greater psychological well-being. As for China, Zhang et al. (2015) explored in their study how the perception of work as a vocation is the result of a long tradition in Chinese culture. In the case of the USA, Moran (2016) focuses on the role of teachers in the development of purpose, and points out that it is often equated with career instead of broader life goals. This research also shows that personal meaning and commitment are frequently key dimensions in teaching practices in terms of the development of purpose in young people. The teacher has a privileged role as a counsellor, and in their role as a guide, they can stimulate and support the development of purpose.

it is flexible enough to adapt to different contexts and particularities. The effects of this process (in our case, each activity, action, project, etc. carried out to develop purpose) will also depend on the specific synergies and dynamics and the level of participation of their protagonists, in our case, young people.

In this autonomous, participatory model, assessment is understood as a process that generates dynamics of reflection, learning and change from and of action, where the people involved share in the power of the assessment by putting into play a principle of autonomy and responsibility (Cabrera, 2010). In this sense, assessment cannot be seen as a process that is an end in itself, or as being parallel to the action, but rather both processes are fully connected and should be based on the participation of the different agents involved. In addition, this form of assessment also has a positive impact on the development of self-esteem (Cabrera, 2007), an aspect that is directly linked to the development of purpose in young people.

The defining characteristics of the logic underlying a process of assessment that is intended to be participatory and autonomous are as follows (Cabrera, 2010):

- Rather than a technical, complex process, responsibility for which lies with an expert (monitor, specialist, etc.), it is to be understood as a process where responsibility is shared.
- Rather than a one-way, vertical process, it is a method that stimulates participation and commitment as one of the most effective ways to achieve meaningful, useful and democratic assessments.
- Rather than a process of controls or checks, it is process of action and reflection that facilitates change and improvement.
- Rather than a closed, rigid process, it is an open, flexible process, and although the rules must be clear, it must be adapted to the specific needs and contexts in question.

Some of the keys to fostering this type of autonomous, participatory assessment can be found by asking certain questions.

### 2.1.1 Issues in assessment

Assessment, as an essential part of any educational strategy, must respond to certain questions: what, who, how and when we assess, as well as who does the assessing, among others. These issues must therefore be the starting point in establishing the assessment of educational strategies designed to develop purpose.

As for **what is assessed**, in our case, it would be the process followed and the results obtained through the actions, projects, activities, etc. designed to influence the development of purpose in young people. The assessment indicators must be established taking into account the goals behind each of the actions, etc. and the dimensions of the process being assessed. The involvement of participants (in our case, the young people) in the construction of these indicators is essential for the autonomous, participatory model of assessment. There is an increasing tendency in assessment studies to use democratic processes to determine the assessment indicators (House and Howe, 2000).

As for **who does the assessing**, understanding assessment as a “shared power and responsibility” comprising participatory, dialogic activities to reach consensus among those involved in the process, is an essential part of the participatory, autonomous model of assessment. In this sense, one of the keys to fostering this

type of assessment lies in the participating agents. We therefore believe that beyond the assessment techniques used, it is necessary to combine the traditional modality where the teacher is the one who is responsible for evaluating with:

- Self-assessment by the young person based on their own assessment evidence, using criteria that have been negotiated previously (Sanmartí, 2007). Self-assessment helps in: 1) the development of critical thinking, with greater autonomy and self-regulation of learning, 2) the achievement of the transversal objectives and 3) the development of metacognition.
- Co-assessment or assessment among peers based on the assessment evidence using criteria that have been negotiated previously (Sanmartí, 2007). Co-assessment influences the development of cooperative learning and training in solidarity, autonomy and responsibility, etc.

As for **how we assess**, one of the keys to assessment is in the strategy used. This is why some authors such as Osler and Starky (2005), Kerr and Cléber (2004), Bordas and Cabrera (2001) and Cabrera (2010) highlight the close relationship that exists between the assessment techniques used by the teacher and the development of civic competences. Although these techniques<sup>6</sup> may be quantitative<sup>7</sup> (for example, a questionnaire), participatory, autonomous assessment uses mostly qualitative, participatory techniques, such as an interview, a discussion group, etc. However, beyond this classification, what is essential is to decide on the most appropriate technique to assess the indicators (set beforehand, in a participatory way), in order to assess the results obtained through the actions, activities, etc. and the process followed. Bearing in mind this reflection, an example of some techniques that can be used for assessing the object being studied is offered below. It is first important to emphasise, though, that the way they are used will also depend on the type of educational strategy being assessed. For example, if a wide-reaching project, such as a service-learning project, aimed at promoting the development of purpose, is to be assessed, more global techniques such as a reflective diary, a blog, etc. may be used. However, if the strategy is to assess a specific activity, we recommend the use of more precise techniques such as a structured interview, an assessment sheet for each activity, etc.

- Reflective diary (structured, semi-structured, open). It is a type of task that can be used to gather feelings, emotions, doubts, questions, proposals, etc., provoked by the execution of the project.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that those instruments that have been used in other research to measure the development of purpose can be used and adapted. In this line, we offer here the proposals by Bronk (2014), who presents the measurement instruments that are regularly used in empirical studies, and which are designed to assess a conception of the goals. In this chapter, Bronk points out that surveys are the most common assessment tool for the study of purpose. For their part, Schulenberg, Schnetzer and Buchanan (2011) carried out an analysis of the psychometric properties of certain items of the “*Purpose in life test*” (PIL; Crumbaugh and Maholick, 1969). This test was designed to ascertain the perceived meaning of life. The PIL is a test that has been subjected to more tests of psychometric solidity than any other measure of purpose (Bronk, 2014). In addition to this technique, there are others that are commonly used in the studies of meaning/purpose and these include a series of variables (life satisfaction, purpose in life, propensity to boredom, psychological distress) that are closely related to the construction of meaning. Some of these techniques are: *the Life Purpose Questionnaire* (LPQ; Hutzell, 1989, cited in Bronk, 2014), *The Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (MLQ; Steger *et al.* 2006, cited in Bronk, 2014), *The Seeking of Noetic Goals test* (SONG; Crumbaugh, 1977, cited in Bronk, 2014), *The Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS; Diener *et al.*, 1985, cited in Bronk, 2014), *The Boredom Proneness Scale* (BPS; Farmer and Sundberg, 1986, cited in Bronk, 2014), and *The Outcome Questionnaire* (OQ-45.2; Lambert *et al.*, 1996, cited in Bronk, 2014). As regards qualitative techniques, we find that interviews, reflective diaries and documentary analysis have proven to be useful ways to assess beyond the self-construction of purpose (Bronk, 2014). This type of qualitative techniques provide a qualitative description of an experience that can be useful in the understanding of the causes and motivations that condition purpose. Such is the case of *The Revised Youth Purpose Interview* (Andrews *et al.* 2006, cited in Bronk, 2014), a semi-structured interview drawn up from the dimensions of self-understanding and development of identity.

<sup>7</sup> Quantitative instruments can also be designed from a participatory perspective (Folgueiras and Sabariego, 2015, F).

- Creation of a blog to bring together the diary of the experience chronologically as the project is carried out. One of the added values of blogs, compared to paper diaries, is the possibility to interact with readers.
- Digital storytelling, whereby students use a series of phonetic, visual and sensorial elements to recount their experiences as the actions, activities, projects, etc., linked to purpose are carried out.
- Debates. An issue related to the experiences the students involved in the project have been through can be raised to be discussed. A procedure or protocol is recommended to help carry this out properly. The protocol can be organised, for example, based on the goal of the debate.
- Questionnaires. This can complement the assessment of activities, actions, projects, etc. For example, after finishing them, you can develop a questionnaire that could collect the satisfaction of students in terms of the educational strategies used to develop purpose. The results may help to understand aspects such as the level of involvement, the degree of participation, etc. and can help them to reflect on how these elements influence in the development of purpose.
- Assessment sheets. These may be used to assess the objectives, resources, learning methods, etc. used in each specific activity carried out. Young people can fill them in after each session and they can provide us with extensive, varied information about the usefulness of activities in working on the elements and dimensions linked to the development of purpose.

Though all of these techniques are transferrable to any context, their use is also conditioned by this variable. For example in Finland, “Furthermore, Finland has been known for the overall absence of testing culture (Sahlberg, 2011). Instead teachers are educated to reflect and assess their teaching by themselves, and thus, they demonstrate on the other hand high expectations towards the students and on the other hand provide special education for the weaker students (Uljens & Nylund, 2013)” (FINLAND, personal conversation, 2015).

Beyond the technique selected, it is important that it always be systematised. For example, if we take on a blog, the technique for collecting information will be the blog itself. On the other hand, if we carry out a debate, for example, we will have to collect this information. While there are different methods, one possibility would be to: develop a table of observations to collect the main behaviours, etc. related to the objectives being worked on through actions, projects, etc. During the session, some participants may take on the role of observers. You can then later work on the information collected through the table by the students. This way we will also be including processes of co-assessment.

As for **when we assess**, the model of participatory, autonomous assessment involves the use of continuous assessment, which means taking into account three moments of assessment: in the beginning, during the process of implementation of activities, actions, projects, etc. to develop purpose, and at the end.

The dynamics of continuous assessment can be fertile ground for personal and collective self-reflective processes. They also give teachers continuous feedback on our interventions and allow young people to carry out a process of individual self-reflection. These processes of reflection as part of the assessment should also, in our view, involve interaction between emotion and cognition (Felten, Gilchrist, Darby, 2006, cited in Folgueiras, Luna and Puig, 2013). “There should be more emphasis on the emotions and development of

empathy” (FINLAND, personal conversation, 2015). By opening the door to emotions, we are not suggesting that emotion should be made a part of the process of reflection as it always has been and always will be, or encouraging reflection by simply asking the students “how do you feel?”, but rather we are suggesting that teachers must explicitly consider the role that emotions can play in all reflective learning processes. This consideration is particularly important when accompanying young people in thinking about their future beyond the options they are usually offered as appropriate to their social profile, gender, class, etc. This places the students in challenging, new situations within the community, generating emotions of all kinds. If we can make these emotions visible, use them and reflect on them by linking them with cognitive aspects, it is likely that the learning process will be more meaningful.

### 2.1.2 Assessment as a space for reflection

Autonomous, participatory assessment goes beyond assessing the effects of the intervention. The reflective process that is followed from beginning to end is therefore extremely important. The participatory, autonomous assessment process also helps to empower participants.

It is important to bear in mind that during the assessment process, the construction of purpose is influenced not only by individual characteristics and values, but also by the socio-cultural values and traditions that surround the individuals (Shin et al., 2014), such as gender, social class, culture. The normative aspect of learning to be what is expected of us is very strong in schools where, as our Korean colleague highlighted, “students learn who they want to be in terms of the relationship with others, what their life purpose is and should be” (Shin, personal communication, 2015). The social pressure to assume certain roles and behaviours thus marks our prospects for the future. In some geopolitical contexts, our future options are determined from an early age, as the school you go to can open or close opportunities. For example in Korea, “many people [...] think that the level of college they enter will change their future, and it is very competitive to go to a good college” (Shin, personal communication, 2015), and in the US, where the youngest already take tests and exams in order to be able to enter the most prestigious schools. It is in this context that the young students may develop a feeling of inability, a fear of failure that leads them to reassess their vital purposes (Malin et al., 2014). Therefore, the ideal of the individual as a free and liberated subject, able to build themselves through their desires and emotions, celebrated in the United States as the “self-made man”, often clashes with a much more standardised reality that, as Plant (1997) explains, tends to dichotomise and identify differential or singular experiences as threats<sup>8</sup>.

On the other hand, given that this is a participatory assessment, it must be remembered during the assessment process that the assessment itself will also be conditioned by the concept and type of participation young people have with their mentors<sup>9</sup>. As our Korean colleague points out, we must not reduce participation

<sup>8</sup> The search for this freedom beyond social constraints is not at all easy, and involves often painful processes of fragmentation (as happens to Frida, Biglia, 2013) or even of annihilation to wipe away the marks of our past life in order to enter spaces that are unavailable to those of our social group (Subramaniam, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Whenever there is participation, language and power come into play. Scott (2003) distinguishes between public language and hidden language. Public language belongs to a social space and a set of actors. It is understood in a broad sense where acts of language converge along with a large number of social practices. Hidden language is the result of practices of domination and power relations.

to the number of hours (quantitative) but rather we must focus on quality. For example in Korea, “Students’ outcomes in service-learning courses are assessed mostly by the hours of participation . The quality (or the content) of their participation is not assessed, unfortunately. It depends on the policy of each school district, but most schools ask students to have 45 to 60 hours of volunteering to complete. Also, there are some essay contests on students’ volunteering experiences but not many students participate.” (Shin, personal communication, 2015)

To make an assessment as to the quality, we can use the proposal by Novella and Trilla (2001) who point to different degrees of involvement in what they call the stairs of participation: simple involvement, consultative participation, projective participation and metaparticipation, while Pateman (1970) categorises the levels of participation in pseudoparticipation, partial participation and full participation.

## Summary

Participatory, autonomous assessment will allow us to:

- Determine the results obtained in terms of development of purpose in young people who are involved in the activities, actions, projects, etc.
- Carry out internal/external validation of activities, actions, projects, etc. assessed.

Also, from this participatory, autonomous approach, where reflection occupies a central place, the assessment process is transformed into a privileged space for the development of personal and social skills linked to personal development of purpose.

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Bobbio (1986) distinguishes between visible power dynamics, invisible power and hidden power. Visible power occurs when those who have most power exercise it over those who lack it. Hidden power is born from the decisions that are taken “behind closed doors”. Invisible power is hidden behind social and institutional rules that define what is possible for a particular actor. Hidden and public language, together with the visible, hidden and invisible dynamics of power, coexist in the process of assessment of activities, actions, projects, etc. to influence the development of purpose.

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