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Delving Into Pragmatic Horizons: Critical Ethnographic Research on the Assessment Culture in School

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Annotation. In this article, we introduce Carspecken's (1996) pragmatic horizon analysis and validity reconstruction (PHAVR), an approach for examining taken for granted claims articulated by research participants as part of the critical ethnographic research. Validity claims are the assumptions that express implicit intentions of participants of communicative act. The application of the approach is illustrated by two examples from our fieldwork established to explore the assessment culture in one school.

Keywords: *Carspecken's critical ethnography, pragmatic horizon analysis and validity reconstruction (PHAVR), formative assessment, learning-oriented assessment culture.*

Introduction: Unacknowledged Power of Critical Ethnographic Research

The scientific debate around alarming trends such as social exclusion, poverty, racism, and violation of human rights raises questions about the meaning and purpose of social research as well as its contribution to improved conditions for the disadvantaged (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kincheloe, 2011). In this context, the role of educational research is to raise awareness and empower change in search of a better, safer, and more respectful life. Critically focused educational research is an expression

of democracy, a liberating practice, or a moral project (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) when a researcher through his narrative, aims to inspire the quest for social justice.

Schools are complex social systems that are influenced not only by educational policies, and various economic and societal tendencies but are routinely shaped by human interactions and human experiences. As a result, tensions arise that may have a huge effect on the way people act and feel. One source of tension in schools is assessment especially when it comes to standardized testing. These tensions could be avoided or reduced if everyone better understood why one or another decision is made at the national level, how it translates into daily school practices, and what impact it has on the students and teachers. Moreover, a critical approach would encourage reflection and rethinking of common practices that may lead to improved teaching, learning, and assessment in schools.

In the context of current societal trends and challenges, social research should aim at empowering communities and researchers to become more reflective and critical of certain cultural practices undertaken in schools to make our schools more inclusive places for all children and teachers and avoid reproducing social inequalities. The critical ethnographic methodology can offer ways to work on critical inquiry that may be useful to qualitative researchers.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the potential of pragmatic horizon analysis and validity reconstruction (hereinafter - PHAVR) (Carspecken, 1996), as an element of critical ethnographic research, to reveal the implicit cultural, social, and political meanings of assessment practices. To reach our aim, we are going to address the following objectives:

- To make an overview of the literature on educational assessment as a constituent of school culture.
- To discuss the epistemological premise of critical research and its implications for PHAVR.
- To illustrate the practical technique of PHAVR through the analysis of two examples selected from researchers' fieldwork.
- To make cultural practices explicit by identifying meanings, assumptions, and perspectives associated with assessment in schools.

Literature review: Educational Assessment as a Constituent of School Culture

It is becoming evident that education systems in various countries rely too heavily on testing and falsely associate the quality of education with it. While it is common to justify the increased amounts of testing across countries as a way to improve achievement, researchers warn that this is only a temporary illusion (Ridgeway et al., 2004). Under pressure to prepare students for the test, teachers transfer similar test-based practices

into their daily classrooms at the cost of other educational activities. Moreover, grading in schools is overemphasized, as noted by Black and Wiliam (1998) when the focus on the use of sophisticated scoring systems diverts teachers' attention and time from the practical work with students. This pressurizes teachers, casts doubt on the value of their work because their contribution is measured only by means of test scores, increases the mistrust between parents and schools, and ignores student needs in the pursuit of better test scores.

An alternative approach to assessment emerged in the literature at the end of the 20th century and was supported by the well-known meta-analysis of 250 studies conducted by Black and Wiliam (1998) that revealed the positive impact of formative assessment practices on student learning and concomitant educational outcomes. Researchers have compared the impact of formative assessment interventions in countries like the United States which has jumped from 20th position to one of the top five countries in the international student achievement surveys such as PISA and TIMSS. Other research confirmed these trends and provided new insights, for example, how the impact of formative assessment interventions varies by subject, age group of learners, and nature of the intervention (Kingston & Nash, 2011) or emphasized the importance of feedback quality for the learning process (Kliuger & DeNisi, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and specifically identified learning and assessment strategies that have had the greatest impact on educational outcomes (Hattie, 2012).

Despite compelling arguments for formative assessment, practice in schools does not change at the desired pace and is hard to sustain (Gardner et al., 2008). In Lithuania, for example, external school evaluation reports note that out of 53 schools that underwent performance evaluation in 2019, not a single school had reached at least level 3 (out of 4) on the indicator – Assessment for learning (NSA, 2019). Such findings are of great concern both to schools and to education policymakers as well as to the researchers who are expected to analyse the reasons for the low uptake of formative assessment.

A way to explore assessment is to analyse school culture that is shaped by the daily interactions between teachers, students, and parents. According to Birenbaum (2014), when analysed through the lenses of assessment, two types of culture are identified in schools: *grading-oriented testing culture* (hereinafter – TC) and *learning-oriented assessment culture* (hereinafter – AC). TC is characterized by school orientation towards external control, narrowing of educational goals to fit the requirements of examinations, and disregard for a student's unique abilities and learning needs. Schools that practice AC have a goal to promote and support student learning by helping them to improve, teachers feel responsible for the consequences of their practices and realize either success or failure depends on the community.

The culture of the organization, according to Schein (1990), manifests itself at three fundamental levels: basic artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. For Levi-Strauss, the level of implicit cultural manifestations is the most important and he

describes it as the rules of conduct that operate beyond the rational mind as a result of which people follow them unconsciously (Monaghan & Just, 2000). From the point of view of critical theory, the level of basic assumptions according to Apple (2012), could be called ideological saturation, which is based on the internalization of principles, norms, and common-sense rules of social order. According to the philosopher, schools, by prioritizing certain elements of knowledge and content, and by choosing certain teaching and assessment strategies, reproduce behavioural patterns that are based on power relations, and seek economic benefits for some privileged groups, while disadvantaging others. Bowles and Gintis (2011) are even more critical about education that mirrors economy-based social relations by adopting capitalist modes of functioning in schools where, for example, assessment serves as a reward for good work similar to the salary received by the employee for his work. Such an approach can hardly be regarded as promoting either social equality or holistic human development. And yet, the purpose of critical theory as described by Apple (2012), Kincheloe (2011), and Carspecken (1996) who believed in the power of human agency, is to awaken awareness and schools play an important role in helping students to develop values that enable young people to fight for their rights and transform unjust cultural practices.

Assessment is a cultural phenomenon that has traditionally been associated with the power to judge the learning potential of others. These decisions often represent the economic interests of certain groups even if the direct link is not straightforward. According to the literature, one of the main concerns is the ideology of neoliberalism, which in the current political context dictates many decisions predicated on increasing economic benefits and competition (Macrine, 2016). In education, the influence of neoliberalism is made visible through a number of examples, such as the development of educational standards, standardized testing, school ratings, school audits, etc. (Dionne & Milley, 2019). It is evident from the testimonies of teachers, students, and parents how the above-mentioned measures alter the mindset of school communities and how in the attempt to survive, they accept the rules, become less critical, and hardly recognize manipulation.

Methodology: The Methodological Implications of Critical Research Epistemology on PHAVR

The critical theory provides theoretical underpinnings for critical research that questions the prevailing norms, certain behavioural patterns and encourages thinking not only about what reality is, but what it could be (Madison, 2005; Carspecken, 1996). The main task of critical theory is to reveal how power relations are manifested in education, why some school practices conflict with social justice, how certain interest groups benefit from these practices, and how different ideologies influence these decisions. To answer

these questions, it is necessary to go beyond conventional social research that aims only to understand and accept what has been happening. The critical theory leads researchers towards *praxis*, a reflection-based action with the goal to transform, emancipate, and liberate (Kincheloe, 2011).

The connection between theory and method is supported by the value orientation of the critical research and the researcher's commitment to always question taken-for-granted assumptions and norms that may unconsciously restrict people's lives (Madison, 2004). And when it comes to the practical implementation of critical theory, Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) suggest that it finds its method in critical ethnography so that critical ethnography becomes the "doing" or the "performance" of critical theory (Madison, 2005).

Critical ethnography has been developed by Carspecken (1996) who explained his theory as the relation of holistic modes of human experience to communicative structures. Successful communication is central to every human experience and involves the exchange of understanding. When attempting to understand a given situation, we make assumptions that involve articulating different kinds of "truth claims" (subjective, objective, or normative-evaluative), which require a different kind of support to reach a consensus between speakers. His work is grounded on the ideas of J. Habermas, for whom reaching understanding is considered to be a process of reaching agreement among participants of the communicative act which occurs when "with the illocutionary force of an utterance of a speaker can motivate a hearer to accept the offer contained in his speech act and thereby to accede to a rationally motivated binding force" (Habermas, 1984, p. 279). Thus, the speech act becomes successful only when the listener accepts the grounds and reasons (validity claims) offered by the speaker that translates into the subsequent action.

Carspecken (1996) presents his approach as five stages of critical ethnography. The important feature of this approach is that it addresses two distinct domains – group culture and social system, for the analysis of both he employs different methodological approaches. An interpretive methodology favours the emic or insider's position that is used to analyse culture and system analysis that is based on the etic or outsider's position. The aim of the first three stages of critical ethnography is to reconstruct the culture, and the last two stages to explain how routine actions form and reproduce system relations (Georgeiou & Carspecken, 2002).

By applying all stages, the researcher begins to recognize the norms of the cultural group; unwritten rules, personal beliefs of the group members, and values that shape certain patterns of behaviour and thus begins the reconstruction of the cultural features of that group. One of the methods unique to this approach is the PHAVR. To demonstrate the use of PHAVR, we will use the data from the critical ethnographic study that aims to explore the development of learning-oriented assessment culture conducted during the school year 2020–2021 in one Lithuanian school. Reconstruction of meaning presents the researcher's attempt to put his or her impressions into words. According to Carspecken

(1996), the researcher is likely to achieve more precision by means of PHAVR which is used in combination with coding or initial meaning reconstruction and is helpful for the validation of cultural themes. He combines the phenomenological concept of the horizon with Habermas's pragmatic theory of meaning. For Habermas (1984), the pragmatic function of speech has to do with intersubjective recognition that is reached when the participants of the communicative action understand a linguistic expression in the same way and this understanding constitutes the intended action. To understand what a speaker wants to say, the listener has to know the conditions that make a speech act acceptable. The mutual understanding cannot be reached by force, it has to be accepted as valid by participants, i.e., it has to meet the conditions of the rationally motivated agreement. The agreement is based on common convictions.

The pragmatic horizon of the communicative act involves different meanings that are placed on two axes, the temporal axis, and the paradigmatic axis. The temporal axis locates the communicative act within the participant's awareness of prior events and his or her assumptions about future events while the paradigmatic axis involves the recognition of meaning through semantic and pragmatic units like similarity, contrast, complementarity, participants' roles in the communicative act, hierarchies, etc. As explained by Carspecken (1996), when reconstructing the meaning, the researcher articulates the validity claims that emerge as a result of the interplay between different meanings of the horizon. The horizon consists of several layers; the meanings that the speaker wishes to emphasize appear in the foreground while other meanings appear somewhere between the foreground and background. The function of the background meanings is to assist in figuring out the meaning in the foreground. The background of the horizon reflects the speaker's attitudes, beliefs, and values common to the participants of the communicative event. Background claims that are often articulated represent meanings that are taken for granted by the members of the cultural group and thus, by studying them, the researcher can learn a lot about people, their culture, and the power relations within a group.

A communicative event is a social action. When participating in it, the participants assume certain roles and communication styles based on cultural tradition and power relations. In reconstructing the meaning, we try to understand its rationale or the reasons that the speaker uses to justify his or her utterance. The reasons are divided into four categories of truth claims: objective - based on the principle of open access for everyone observing the situation; subjective - based only on the principle of unique access available to the speaker; normative-evaluative - which are based on the norms adopted by a certain cultural group; identity - which reflects the speaker's identity and position in this world (Habermas, 1984; Carspecken, 1996; Carspecken, 2001; Call-Cummings & Ross, 2019). By focusing on the analysis of reasons, the researcher tacitly understands the validity claims that underline the meaning of the communicative act.

To demonstrate a practical application of PHAVR, we will provide two examples from the ethnographic study aimed at exploring school assessment culture conducted from

June 2020 to June 2021. The scope of the study included: observation of over 50 lessons, participation in 15 staff meetings, 8 focus group interviews with teachers, parents, and students, and 21 individual interviews with teachers and the administration team. The school is one of many located in the suburbs of the big city in Lithuania. The area is not densely populated, so one school is sufficient to provide education for local children. Being the only school in the area, it covers all levels from pre-primary to upper secondary, however, only a few students remain in upper secondary as most families look for a place in other "prestigious" gymnasiums in the city.

Some considerations regarding the ethics of research need to be discussed. Critical ethnography always starts from the researcher's moral obligation to address questions of injustice. This commitment is based on the principles of personal freedom, dignity, and compassion for the suffering and disadvantaged groups. The researcher aims to illuminate the hidden issues of power and control that unconsciously impact people's behaviour and understandings. We attempted to adopt Spradley's (1979) and Madison's (2005) principles of ethics when conducting our research:

Openness and transparency – before we started the research, we introduced the community with its' aim, procedures, and scope and explained our roles and what was expected from the participants.

Protecting the research participants' interests, ensuring their rights and safety – the commitment to research participants is prioritized over the researcher's academic interests. In case moral dilemmas in the field appeared, we ensured the participants would not be harmed. Anonymity was guaranteed to ensure security and participants' interests.

Responsibility for the academic community – research ethics when collecting, processing, and presenting research results was ensured.

The voice of participants should be considered when writing the final report.

Anonymity – any information in the report does not allow the identification of the research participants.

Results and Discussion: Assessment Restrained by the System

In the text below two situations from our fieldwork are presented to see how PHAVR works in practice:

Example One

The first example is taken from a school staff meeting organized six weeks after the beginning of the school year. The meeting was intended to discuss how successfully the primary (grades 1 to 4) students were able to return to "face-to-face" learning after the summer holidays and three months of distance learning during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Spring of 2020). The meeting was chaired by the headteacher (HT). In the following extract, a second-grade teacher (T) was looking for solutions to help a boy with learning and behavioural difficulties, their conversation went like this:

[1] HT: I'm now thinking, can't we turn to Children's Rights [Children's Rights Protection Office] when parents refuse to undergo formalization of special needs? If we see that the child is unable to progress, are we just leaving it as it is?

[2] T: Then they have to write an official refusal.

[3] HT: [...] but in the end, so we are teaching these children? Can we suggest any solutions, any recommendations for parents?

[8] T: But we are better aware of the child's learning situation than parents because we are professional … Our decision is that a child cannot go on without the program [adapted curriculum standards].

[12] T: When you feel that there is potential, you can make an effort and work, and when you really see that there is no potential and that child suffers and you can't make it easier for him, he has to do the same tasks … and I have to assess him in the same way as others, though from the heart I am less demanding to him than to others, if I see the slightest progress I always give him higher grades.

[13] HT: Yes [listens carefully and agrees].

The pragmatic horizons analysis and validity reconstruction (see Tab.1) are conducted premised on this extract from the teacher's speech:

"When you feel that there is potential, you can make an effort and work, and when you really see that there is no potential and that child suffers and you can't make it easier for him, he has to do the same tasks … and I have to assess him in the same way as others, though from my heart I am less demanding to him than to others; if I see the slightest progress, I always give him higher grades […]"

Table 1

Pragmatic Horizon, Example One

	Objective	Subjective	Normative-evaluative	Identity
Foreground	A boy has learning difficulties that arrest his progress. (OR) I give him higher grades than I should, because my decisions are based on the observation of the boy's progress, not the achieved level.	I am sorry to watch how the child is suffering because of the lack of learning educational support.	Teachers should be sensitive when assessing students that have learning difficulties.	I am trying from my heart to help students who struggle with their learning.
Mid-ground	When special needs are diagnosed, teachers can adapt teaching, assessment, and the level of difficulty.	I feel bad when I cannot help a child and have to assess in the same way for everyone. (AND) By helping a boy, I behave unfairly towards other kids.	The school has the right to ask for support from Child Rights Protection Office when the family is ignoring their recommendations.	I have the competency to make decisions about student learning.
Background	The national education system does not acknowledge student's efforts.	My colleague might think that my judgments about the results are unreliable. (AND) It is disappointing when parents disregard my recommendations.	The teachers' voices should be heard when making decisions about students who have learning difficulties. (OR) Responsible institutions like Child Rights Protection Office should make the family comply with the recommendations of professionals.	I am a professional teacher. .

The objective meanings of the horizon demonstrate that the teacher's assessment of the boy's achievement is higher than it should be, but she is convinced that the situation would be resolved by formally recognizing special needs. The boy could receive more professional help and she could adjust the difficulty of the tasks when assessing his progress. Since the system focuses on the assessment of the achieved standard, student efforts make little difference. The teacher is likely to ignore formal achievement requirements when assessing the boy's progress, his results are higher because she takes into consideration his efforts and the slightest improvement.

Unfortunately, the boy's family does not give permission to begin the necessary procedures to identify special needs, the members of the family deny the problems and ignore the teacher's recommendations. Under these circumstances, the boy is deprived of learning assistance and other help, which may cause irreversible consequences for his future learning opportunities. The conversation between the head teacher and teacher indicates that they are negotiating the limits of their power and are likely to use it in order to compel the family to obey their recommendations by involving the Child Rights Protection Office.

The teacher experiences a full range of feelings, including shame that she cannot help the boy and anger with the boy's family, and realizes that conflict with the family is unavoidable as she has no other choice than to involve the Child Rights Protection Office. She is also concerned about how the other teachers, her colleagues, might perceive her as a professional if her judgments about student progress do not reflect reality. At the same time, she identifies herself as a professional teacher and as a sensitive person who cares about the well-being and the future of the boy.

This extract contains many normative-evaluative meanings that reveal what is expected from good teachers; for example, teachers should be empathic and sensitive to special needs students, and when assessing their progress, they cannot compare them with other students, teachers should adjust standards and assessment criteria. However, she is expected to make reliable and valid judgments about her pupils' abilities, and she cannot demonstrate particular care about one student and be biased when assessing his progress as this is considered unfair and unprofessional unless special needs are formally identified. These expectations are contradictory, because officially teachers are required to assess student results based on their achieved level, but not based on the amount of effort the students must put in to achieve progress.

The teacher's intention to involve responsible institutions, in this case, seems understandable but on the other hand, a family's decision to avoid recognition of special needs could also be understood because in the past, when special needs had been officially diagnosed, the child was negatively labelled for life and his future academic, professional, and social life was restricted. Due to experience, the family does not even listen to the teacher's explanations that the situation has changed a lot since those times, and

nowadays the identification of special needs means nothing more than providing more support and professional assistance to the child.

This analysis reveals the complexity of assessment in schools and how it is related to other systemic problems that are beyond the remit of education. Through this passage, we can understand the dilemmas teachers face in their daily work and may infer how it may influence their motivation and sense of satisfaction with their work.

Example Two

The next example is taken from teachers' weekly meetings to discuss senior grade students' progress and results before the end of the first semester. The period under discussion covers several weeks of distance learning that took place during the second wave of the pandemic. The meeting is chaired by the Head teacher (HT) who invites the class teacher to introduce a particular student's results following which other teachers are invited to add what seems to be important, and so each student is discussed in turn. In this extract, after the class teacher briefly introduced Thomas's (the name is changed) results, the head teacher invited another teacher (T) to provide additional information about Tomas's learning. Their conversation went like this:

[1] HT: which other teachers want to add, T, you teach Lithuanian?
[2] T: Yes, I can … I'm ready. Well, Thomas, exactly as the class teacher described, is not the one who is motivated and puts a lot of effort into learning, but he, as a young man is very kind, and he has never been angry with me, never said a bad word to me. For me, this is important, but surely, these features are not assessed; during the examination, his knowledge of grammar and literature and his writing are going to be assessed. So, since during the pandemic he had not participated often, so I decided to call his father and talked to him, and as a result, Tomas is participating in all remote lessons. He works minimally, of course, when it comes to writing a paragraph, he uses phrases from a textbook or from the Internet, but he started working and now his mark is 4 [a passing grade].
[3] HT: Thank you very much, T, it's good to hear, that you find time and call the parents of naughty pupils.
[4] T: I feel I have to throw a life-jacket to him, <…> we should save ourselves together.
[5] HT: let's hope that the Lithuanian language examination will be passed.

A pragmatic horizons analysis and validity reconstruction (see Tab.2) are completed for this extract of the teacher's contribution:

"Well, Thomas, exactly as the class teacher described, is not the one who is motivated and puts a lot of effort into learning, but he, as a young man is very kind, and he has never been angry with me, never said a bad word to me. For me, this is important, but surely, these features are not assessed; during the examination, his knowledge of the grammar and literature and his writing are going to be assessed."

Table 2

Pragmatic Horizon, Example Two

	Objective	Subjective	Normative-evaluative	Identity
Foreground	The Lithuanian language examination focuses on the assessment of language skills and literary awareness. (AND) Assessment of personal dispositions is not included as part of school graduation.	I am sorry for Thomas. (OR) I am disappointed with the examination system. I don't think, it is enough to assess writing or grammar, personal dispositions should also matter.	Cognitive skills are considered more important than social and emotional skills.	I am a caring teacher.
Mid-ground	Thomas is likely to fail the examination.	I don't want to be blamed if he fails.	The Assessment system is meritocratic, only academic skills matter.	
Background	The results of the Lithuanian examination are crucial for university entrance and future careers.	I am not afraid to talk about problems in front of other colleagues and the head teacher.	Teachers are always blamed for poor examination results.	I am concerned about fairness.

The analysis of the teacher's subjective perception reveals her concern about the student's ability to pass the exam, disappointment with the system that highlights cognitive skills and uses test-based practices to assess student performance, as well as her helplessness. At the same time, though indirectly, she is anxious about what colleagues will think of her as a teacher if Thomas does not pass the exam. This confusion is a cause of discomfort for the teacher that makes her speak openly about things that matter.

The objective horizon meanings demonstrate that the teacher, although being a Lithuanian language teacher, does not prioritize grammar, literary awareness, or writing

abilities over social and emotional skills. In this way, the teacher expresses her doubts about a system of assessment based only on testing academic abilities and does not pay any attention to social and emotional skills. Therefore, the teacher's words reflect her desire for the system to be more humane and not judge everyone based on one standard which some students are unlikely to reach.

The normative horizon reveals several tacit meanings; we assume that everyone in the school understands the importance of examination, but there are some reasons to doubt the extent to which it has become a goal for every teacher individually. How many of them sincerely believe in it, or is it just compliance with the overarching tradition? This teacher's words reveal that while she does her best to help Thomas ready himself for the examination, she herself is not convinced that this is the goal of education. She is subtly criticizing an assessment system that underestimates social and emotional skills and gives absolute power to the examination to judge people's lives. Not only the possibility to complete secondary education, enter university, secure a state-financed place in higher education, to seek a desired professional career, but also the reputation, the workload, the salary of teachers and headteachers, and even the future of the whole school is determined by examination results.

The current system is designed to prioritize depersonalized examination results over teacher-informed evaluations about social and emotional skills, and who benefits from maintaining such an assessment system. The main "users" of the examination results are the universities; they need the results in a quantifiable mode to fit the mathematical formula that awards higher weighting to the results of examinations and disregards any evidence of student achievement expressed in a qualitative mode. Developed more than 20 years ago, this system was designed to avoid subjective interference with the process of enrolment to ensure transparency and avoid corruption. Throughout the years, the assessment system based on external control has become a source of tension and has brought about undesirable practices like the washback effect, teaching to the test, labelling students based on their cognitive abilities, disregarding social and emotional skills and other unethical behaviours associated with assessment. This has led to the loss of trust in teachers' judgments that, of course, cannot be generalized to all teachers. Not surprisingly, for the decision-makers, the examination still seems to be the only reliable way to rank students for higher education, despite its academic orientation and test-like nature, not losing sight of the fact, that this is probably one of the cheapest and quickest ways to select students. This analysis questions the political decision to judge student readiness for university based solely on the test-based practices and examination results and criticizes the decision to disregard teachers' judgments about student achievement at the end of schooling while relying on their instruction for 12 years. From this situation, we may infer that the deprecation of the teachers' professionalism and judgments is the source of their dissatisfaction.

Discussion

According to Giroux (2005), Apple (2004; 2012), and Au (2009), the education system privileges students who represent dominant cultures and restricts those who do not belong to it. Schools are not neutral, they implement educational policies such as curriculum standards, standardized testing, and school audits that prioritize the interests of dominant groups. This is exactly what we noticed when conducting our research; the curriculum standards and national assessments are designed to serve the "average student" and disregard students who have different learning needs and difficulties achieving nationally-defined expectations.

Effective schools, based on the neoliberal ideology, are supposed to produce good results in standardized testing, irrespective of the school context, student profile, and learning needs. Those schools that fail to meet the standards are regarded as underachieving and are punished by the system (Stoval, 2013; Au, 2009). Our observations confirm that school in its daily life is faced with dilemmas about how to remove barriers for all students to experience and enjoy learning without permanent feelings of failure to keep up with standards but at the same time be effective, not earn a negative reputation and perform well on standardized tests.

Our research makes visible the effects of examinations and test-based practices on teachers' perceptions of their professional identity as well as their classroom practice which are also discussed by Apple (2004), Au (2009), and Biesta (2015), who criticized the external tests as means to control how and what teachers are supposed to teach. The meritocratic approach to assessment, when value is placed on learning outcomes that are measured by external examinations, and thus are considered to provide objective results if compared to teachers' judgments about students' learning, seems to be characteristic of our education system as we discovered through our research.

The findings also confirm Shepard's (2000), Stobart's (2008), Kempf's (2016), and Biesta's (2015) observations about the tendency to narrow the curriculum that teachers undertake when they feel pressure to train students for the test and produce good test results. That is what is referred to in the data in which a teacher regrets when she speaks about the examination requirements that do not appreciate students' social-emotional skills, creativity, responsibility, and other dispositions.

Moreover, our research makes visible the fear and anxiety that teachers experience in their work because of increased testing in schools, and this is similar to Lunneblad and Carlsson's (2012) ethnographic study findings that disclose teachers' despair about the tests regulating how they are supposed to understand and interpret students' learning. All these effects create the feeling of insecurity for teachers. As explained by Ball (2003), this is experienced when teachers are unsure if they are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others or as well as others.

Conclusions

When analysing human experience, the researcher has to unravel the meanings of the pragmatic horizon; in the foreground, we find meanings that the speaker wants to emphasize, for example, that a teacher is disappointed with the test-based assessment system that devalues social and emotional skills or, as in the second example, that despite the formal requirement to assess proficiency level, the teacher awards higher grades to a boy with special needs because she appreciates his efforts. The background discloses the contextual meanings that influence the perception of what is foregrounded, such as a teacher's concern about her reputation in case her students fail the examination or the exertion of undue influence over a boy's family by involving the Child Rights Protection Office. The foreground meanings are open to everyone and easily recognizable, but the meanings of the background are recognized only by insiders, so the researcher who is going to reconstruct the meaning of communicative action must be familiar with the culture of the group as if he or she is an insider. The distinction between objective, subjective, normative-evaluative, and identity claims reveals how different power structures affect perceptions of the world order and their role in the world. The articulation of validity claims by means of horizon analysis "makes tacit knowledge explicit" (Agar, 2013, p. 50) and takes the researcher further than articulating the reasons, it also provides a broader picture of assessment culture in schools as still very fragile. On the other hand, such value-driven research has the potential not only to explain what is going on, but to increase participants' reflexivity and to invite participants to transformative action aimed at improving both macro-systems through public criticism of the examination system that favours academic skills and disregards social and emotional skills, and micro-systems by convincing parents to make decisions in the interests of their children.

The approach outlined above offers a way to use critical theory to study social actions and interpret the research findings. There is no single manner in how to apply Carspecken's critical ethnography, nor is there a single way to employ the PHAVR, and this is because critically oriented research seeks to explain those aspects of social life that are not objective but depend on the experiences of members of a cultural group.

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Gilinantis į pragmatinius horizontus: kritinis etnografinis vertinimo kultūros tyrimas mokykloje

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Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje išsamiai pristatomas vienas iš kritinio etnografinio tyrimo duomenų analizės metodų – pragmatinė horizontų analizė ir validumo rekonstrukcija – bei jo taikymo galimybės. Prof. P. F. Carspecken (1996) sukurta kritinės etnografijos metodologija semiasi įžvalgų iš J. Habermaso komunikacinio veiksmo teorijos, fenomenologinės prieigos, siekiančios atskleisti žmogaus sąmonėje esančių reiškinių esmę, Amerikos pragmatizmo mokyklos požiūrio, kad tiesa apibrėžiama remiantis bendruomenės susitarimu dėl ją pagrindžiančių teiginių teisingumo. Straipsnyje taip pat aptariama tyrėjo kritinė orientacija ir tyrimo etikos reikalavimai. Siekiant parodyti metodo tinkamumą analizuoti įvairias švietimo problemas, pristatomi aktualūs mokinių pasiekimų vertinimo klausimai, atskleidžiantys tiek Lietuvai, tiek ir kitoms šalims būdingus švietimo politikos ideologinius prieštaravimus, neatitiktį tarp deklaruojamų švietimo tikslų, priimamų politinių sprendimų ir jų realizavimo mokykloje praktikos. Iliustruojant metodo taikymą naudojamasi 2020 ir 2021 m. m. vykdyto kritinio etnografinio tyrimo vienoje Lietuvos mokykloje duomenimis.