

Challenges of Teachers in the Process of Evaluation and Grading

Natasha ANGELOSKA GALEVSKA
Ss.Cyril & Methodius University

Abstract: One major challenge encountered by teachers is related to the process of grading. Objectivity and accuracy in grading is aim of each educator, still there are lot of obstacles in achieving them. The aim of this study is to examine the concerns and dilemmas of educators towards grading and to point out some ways for overcoming them in an optimal way. Data gathering is based on content analyses of relevant literature, research reports, personal accounts and interviews with practitioners. Results show that there is a number of moral controversies related to the policy of grading. Teachers complain about grade devaluation, pressures for higher grades and situations when they are forced to make compromises that sometimes is not in line with their personal code of ethics. Emphasis of pupils on grades has negative influence on the process of learning. Introduction of inclusive practice in Macedonian schools bring additional dilemmas how to assess children with special education needs who attend regular classes. These children study according to individually developed curricula, but they receive the same certificates as others and there are not criterias for assessing their achievements. Teachers express need to get instructions and guidelines how to deal with this. Discipline issues, awarding and punishing are also among the common pedagogical and moral dilemmas of teachers. Beside legislative and normative acts that should be obeyed, and the code of ethics that should be announced and respected in each school, one efficient way for solving dilemmas in the classroom is group discussion and use of the experience of elder colleagues in previous cases. This can lead to optimal and professional solutions when faced with various challenges on the workplace. Making right decisions affect not only careers of teachers, but affect all the involved sides as well.

Keywords: Teachers, Evaluation, Grading, Inclusive classroom

Introduction

Objectivity and accuracy in evaluation and grading of students is aim and major challenge of each teacher and educator. Still there are lot of obstacles in achieving them. There is a number of factors that influence the formation of the summative grade for the student and some of them have nothing to do with the standards and criteria of assessment. In spite of the efforts of teachers to avoid them, subjective factors they do have a significant impact on the assesment and on the final grade of the student. Introduction of inclusive practice in Macedonian schools bring additional dilemmas in the process of evaluation of children with special education needs who attend regular classes. These children should study according to individually developed curricula, but they receive the same certificates as others. In the curriculums there are not specific criterias or instructions for teachers how to assess their achievements. Therefore, teachers express strong need to get instructions and guidelines how to deal with this.

The aim of this study is to examine the concerns and dilemmas of educators towards grading and to point out some ways for overcoming them in an optimal way. Focus of the study is on the subjective factors and their influence on grading, through the opinions, beliefs and perceptions of teachers.

Evaluation, Assessment and Grading – Definitions

Evaluation as systematic process for gathering data about student achievements is an essential component of teaching. During the process of evaluation teachers seek for the best available indicators on which they can

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decide if goals are being met. Any type of assessment and grading in educational context involves decisions on what can be relevant evidences for a particular situation, how to collect evidence, how to interpret it, and how to communicate with the affected users. The grade is not only used to sum up the achievement of student in the period of time, but it is also a tool for information, motivation and support of learning. Through the evaluation and grading teachers track the level of progress and success of their students.

Through analyses of relevant literature we can find many definitions on assessment. Among variety of definitions we present few of them that match in our context:

Assessment is “the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decision about how to improve learning.” (Walvoord, 2004)

Dwyer (2008) defines assessment of student learning as “process by which we ascertain through data collection if students have learned the skills, content, and habits of mind that will make them successful; if students are not learning, we decide on changes in the curriculum or teaching strategy to improve learning.”

William and Thompson (2008) proposed the terms “formative” and “summative” assessment, given the reason to differentiate the role of evaluation. Formative assessment is introduced as an ongoing process of evaluating students’ learning, providing feedback to adjust instruction and learning and to improve the curriculum. It is defined as assessment for learning within a unit of study where the outcomes guide instruction without associated rigid quantifiers such as grades. (Andrade & Cizek, 2010). Summative assessment, on the other hand, is bound to administrative decisions and assigning grades to the tests. Summative assessment is intended to summarize student attainment at a particular time, whereas formative assessment is intended to promote further improvement of student attainment. (Crooks, 2001)

Subjective Assessment

Subjective assessment and bias in grading can be either conscious or unconscious (Malouff, 2008). Subjective assessment depends on different factors that can be divided in three main categories:

- a) Factors that depends on the student's response to teachers' questioning such as:
 - verbal abilities of the student,
 - ability to perceive and to use perceived data,
 - emotional resistance,
 - clarity and certainty in the given answers
 - other factors related to student behaviour and response that can influence teacher's opinion about student knowledge
- b) Factors related to the teacher as a “tool” for measuring. In this category we can list a number of teacher – related factors such as:
 - teacher's tendency to raise or lower the assessment criteria on his own personal perception and thus gain the reputation of a 'strict' or 'mild' teacher,
 - prior experience of teacher with a student. For example, error in grading known as *halo effect* is related to the teacher's tendency to evaluate students on the basis of a previously acquired and constructed opinion of them. As Rasmussen explain "in the classroom, teachers are subject to the halo effect rating error when evaluating their students. For example, a teacher who sees a well-behaved student might tend to assume this student is also bright, diligent, and engaged before that teacher has objectively evaluated the student's capacity in these areas. When these types of halo effects occur, they can affect students' approval ratings in certain areas of functioning and can even affect students' grades." (Salkind & Rasmussen, 2008) Halo effect as a cognitive bias is aproved on the empirical results of many other researchers as well. Some physical characteristic such as attractiveness can also influence the process of grading. (Landy&Sigal, 1974; Abikoff, Courtney, Pelham, Koplewicz, 1993;)
 - similar to the previous factor is the situation when teacher is guided by the opinions of his or her colleagues previously given to that student. For example, some assigned status of student, such as being labeled as gifted or with learning difficulties can lead to bias grading.
 - in many situations teacher builds the evaluation criteria according to the answers given by other students during their oral or written interogation. The same answer of a student can be rated higher in the group of students with poor marks or can be lower among excellent students.
 - other possible cases occur when the teacher equally evaluates all the answers, unable to make difference between the important from the less important or sometimes evaluates everything with an

average grade. Opposite situation is when the teacher goes too deep and makes a great distinction in the student responses with more than five grades;

c) Factors that depend on the interrogation and evaluation technique that are used. Oral interrogation depends on how suggestive or strict the teacher is during the interrogation, when does it happens, how much is teacher involved in the discussion, how much he supports the student answer, what type of questions are used and other factors. The same errors as in oral questioning are possible during written interrogation. However, written questioning excludes empathy between the student and the teacher and gives students the opportunity to answer the same questions.

Assessing Children with SEN

In the last decade, the concept of inclusive education has been promoted and accepted as a new model of organized teaching and learning that implies creating an inclusive culture, building up an inclusive policy and developing inclusive practices in schools. Assessing the educational development of children with special needs is very challenging for the teachers and they often express the need for accurate and precise guidance in applying the assessment practices in the inclusive classrooms. The best way to improve learning for a diverse range of learners is through appropriate, reliable and valid assessment in the classroom. This is especially important issue for Macedonian teachers because inclusive practice is accepted in all schools. (Angeloska-Galevska & Ilić-Pešić, 2018). The problem is that children with special education needs study according to individually developed curricula, but they receive the same certificates as others and in the curriculums there are not criterias or instructions how to assess their achievements.

When working with special children, teachers are encouraged to implement different practices in order to adjust the pace of instruction to match students' capabilities. Teachers in inclusive classrooms can use formative assessment to plan instruction that maximizes learning. That means that teachers are encouraged to use formative assessments at regular intervals throughout a unit of study and depends on the outcomes of students to make immediate planning decisions regarding pace, readiness and needs of students. (Andrade & Cizek, 2010).

In relation to evaluation and assessment teachers should use more children portfolios because they give rich data about child development and its individual abilities, strengths, constraints, interest, motivation and many other personal features. Portfolio can be a useful mean of the assessment of children if it is organized and filled with data of observation, interviews, rating scales, check lists, photos, children products, evidences of direct assessment and other products of children that teacher and parents can use to track children progress in the dynamic period of the early childhood development. In that way it is important portfolio data to be transferred from preschool institutions to elementary schools. Teachers can use these information also to adjust curriculum and teaching according to children readiness to accomplish the teaching goals.

Method

The research problem was investigated with qualitative research strategy in order to obtain in-depth data about the perceptions of teachers toward grading, their dilemmas and the way of thinking in summing up the grades of students. Through their statements we try to identify what are the factors that influent certain grade, especially subjective aspects beside the objective and standardized ones that are defined in pedagogical legislative.

Data gathering is based on content analyses of relevant literature, research reports, personal accounts and interviews with practitioners. Interviews with teachers were done with semi-structured protocols that include relevant topics of the research problem. With some of interviewees we conduct the interview several times, covering the topics that additionally provoked us.

Sample

Sample for content analyses consist of relevant normative acts and documents such as: Laws and ammendmens on primary, secondary and higher education in the last ten years, Guidelines and Rules for assesing issued by the official institutions such as Ministry of Education and Science, State Inspectorate for Education and the Bureau for Development of Education. Subject of analyses were also annual school plans and daily preparation plans of teachers.

Interviews were made with 16 teachers from different areas, urban and rural. Age of the interviewees is between 26 and 41. Seven of them attend postgraduate programs.

Analysing Strategies

In the qualitative analyses we summarize the results using the strategies for qualitative analyses. First, we browse through all the transcripts, and then we re-read one by one carefully, in details. In this process we make marks about our impressions and label the parts according to the concept that we developed before. In this process of coding we mainly focused on their reflections, concepts and differences in the opinions towards grading. In further phase codes were gathered into categories that we previously defined as relevant. Relevancy of categories was determined on the basis of previous readings and discussions. Main categories in the interview are the following:

- Subjective vs. objective criteria in the process of grading
- Grading of pupils with SEN
- Use of traditional and non-traditional forms of assessment
- Pressure for higher grades and other challenges for teachers in the classroom
- External assessment

All these categories are connected to each other and the order of these categories do not mean hierarchy of their importance. On the bases of the primary data, we tried to make conceptualizations and to produce new knowledge about the grading phenomena.

Results

As qualitative results are broad and extensive, in this paper we present only summarized findings related to some of the defined categories. In presenting the results we try to be unbiased and to present them naturally and neutrally as they were told by the interviewees, without our interpretation.

Category 1. Subjective vs. objective criteria in the process of grading

All respondents stressed that they try to be objective; they avoid subjectivity and reduce it to minimum. But in further discussion they admit that sometimes subjective criteria are present, that 'it is difficult to avoid them' and "they influence the process of grading".

The factors that were mentioned as significant for grading beside test results were the following:

- When student is committed, responsible and dedicated he can get higher grade despite lower results in the test. Continuous work at home and regular fulfilling the tasks influence higher grade. Consequently avoiding daily tasks and duties reduce the grade.
- The student's interest in a subject, active participation in some activities bring credits to students and on the other hand, disinterested behavior lead to lower grade despite the test results.
- Active participation of students in school events and classroom activities, demonstration of creativity and own ideas contribute to the good marks and passive ones get lower marks
- Non-discipline students and students with bad behavior sometimes get power marks because they disrupt the normal course of instruction;
- Lack of clarity of response, when student looks nervous or uncertain or has poor verbal abilities can lower the grade
- Emotional immaturity is sometimes factor for lower grades.

Category 2. Grading of pupils with SEN

Teachers who work in inclusive classrooms express strong need to get instructions and guidelines how to evaluate achievements of children with special education needs because these children have same tests as mainstream students although the individualised education plan contains 70% content of the regular one. Most of the teachers do not feel competent to deal with these children and ask for additional trainings and support from professionalists, special educators, logopedes and other specialists.

According to the responses, there are cases when head teachers of inclusive classrooms try to individualize a grading system for a student with a disability, but other teachers lack knowledge of how to do it or do not put individualized plan in practice. Thus, many students with disabilities receive inaccurate and unfair grades that provide little and meaningful information about their achievement.

Some teachers stated that mainly they can make difference when failure of response is a result of laziness or a result of real problem caused by the child impairment. In these cases, similar responses are graded differently. In order to avoid situations of assessing written test with different criteria, sometimes teachers make adaptation of the test or interrogation techniques. They say that very often testing time for children with SEN is extended or questions are adjusted in accordance with the impairment, for example they print the tests for them with larger fonts and space, or give additional instruction how to fulfill the tasks.

Category 3 .Use of traditional and non-traditional forms of assessment

Related to the forms of assessment, most of the teachers confirmed that beside the traditional forms, they also use non-traditional forms of assessment. They practice group work in classroom or they give group projects as a home assignment where students are divided in groups of four or five and with joint effort prepare presentation, reports, tableaux or posters of the explored theme. Non-traditional forms of assessment require students to exhibit skills for applying, analyzing, and synthesizing information that is not included in such a way in traditional tests.

Teachers say that students love group works in classroom because this kind of work and assessing brings more fun and less stress for students. The problem is that usually one or two students of the group take care of the whole task. This can be an example of unfair grading when other pupils earn credits on behalf of abilities and work of some outstanding students.

Category 4. Pressure for higher grades and other challenges for teachers in the classroom

Results show that there is a number of moral controversies related to the policy of grading. Teachers complain about grade devaluation, pressures for higher grades and situations when they are forced to make compromises that sometimes is not in line with their personal code of ethics. Emphasis of pupils on grades has negative influence on the process of learning. Learning for grades and not for knowledge become even more present after introducing of external assessment in Macedonian schools.

Discipline issues, awarding and punishing are also among the common pedagogical and moral dilemmas that were mentioned by teachers.

Conclusion

All respondents stressed that they try to be objective; they avoid subjective factors in grading and reduce them to minimum. Although these elements are avoided by the teachers, however, they have influenced the formation of the summative grade for the student. These elements have nothing to do with the standards and criteria of assessment, but still they do have a significant impact on the final grade of the student.

Assessment is part of everyday school life and it should be less traumatic for teachers and less painful for students. Using of formative assessment and nontraditional forms of assessment brings teachers quick feedback about their work and about student achievements and guide them to plan the instruction in an optimal way, especially when they work in inclusive classroom with children with special education needs. As much as the students are involved and active in their learning and self assessment, more they will learn.

Beside legislative and normative acts that should be obeyed, and the code of ethics that should be announced and respected in each school, one efficient way for solving dilemmas in the classroom is group discussion and use of the experience of elder colleagues in previous cases. This can lead to optimal and professional solutions when faced with various challenges on the workplace. Making right decisions affect not only careers of teachers, but affect all the involved sides as well.

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Author Information

Natasha Angeloska Galevska

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University
Bul. Goce Delchev 9a, 1000 Skopje
Republic of Macedonia
Contact E-mail: natasa@zf.ukim.edu.mk
