

CHALLENGES IN THE ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT IN MACEDONIA

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Abstract: In the last few years many changes have occurred with policy and standards of evaluation and assessment in all stages of education but in this paper we will give emphasis to standardized assessment in primary and secondary schools. These changes and the challenges that they have created in our country and the USA, will be the main discussion of this paper. It aims to describe the process of student assessment as a means of getting feedback on what they have learned and at the same time, it is a means of finding out whether you have achieved the pre-determined teaching goals. Furthermore, assessment does not only provide information about the teaching and learning process, it also helps in improving education policy, teaching curricula, etc. As Pellegrino, Chudowsky and Glaser (2001) state “Educational assessment seeks to determine how well students are learning and is an integral part of the quest for improved education. It provides feedback to students, educators, parents, policy makers, and the public about the effectiveness of educational services” (p.1). Through a descriptive approach we will give an insight to the present state of assessment in Macedonia and USA and a comparison will be drawn in order to find the similarities and differences between these two systems of education. In recent years, there have been two types of standardized examinations in Macedonia: the state matura and external examination. Due to the brevity of the paper we will only focus on external examination. Although there was a lot of scepticism from the beginning of this examination, the government decided to proceed with that project. It was first carried out as pilot testing, however after a couple of years the results of external examination influenced students’ GPA and the teachers were fined if their grades did not correspond with the grades of the external examination. Although the discontentment continued, external examination was carried out pro forma. However, after last year’s governmental changes, the external examination of 2017 was carried out without any consequences on the teachers or the students. Further changes are expected, even a complete removal of this examination. Is that the best option? Or a reformation and reorganization of the examination should be considered? Based on the application of external examination until now, most teachers and students are against it, nonetheless having in mind the low level of education in recent years, some steps must be taken, be it external examination or any other kind of assessment. The research questions were: 1. Which are the differences and similarities of the assessment process in Macedonia and the USA? 2. Which are the implications that come out of the external examination? The description of the assessment process, implications and challenges will be further presented in the paper.

Keywords: assessment, external examination, implications, challenges

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a process that goes hand-in-hand with the process of teaching. At the end of each school term, all parties are interested in understanding how well they have done, how much they have achieved: students want to see their level of mastery of different subjects, as well as their parents, and teachers and schools on the other hand want a feedback of their work and commitment to their teaching. As Pellegrino, Chudowsky and Glaser (2001) state “Educational assessment seeks to determine how well students are learning and is an integral part of the quest for improved education. It provides feedback to students, educators, parents, policy makers, and the public about the effectiveness of educational services” (p.1).

In the last few years many changes have occurred with policy and standards of evaluation and assessment in all stages of education but in this paper we will give emphasis to standardized assessment in primary and secondary schools. These changes and the challenges that they have created in Macedonia as compared to the USA, will be the main discussion of this paper.

Through a descriptive approach we will give an insight to the present state of assessment in Macedonia and USA and a comparison will be drawn in order to find the similarities and differences between these two systems of education.

CHALLENGES OF STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENT IN MACEDONIA AND USA

In the last few years many states, including Macedonia, have made some reforms regarding standardized assessment. The aim of this kind of assessment is to test students all over the country using the same questions in order to have state-ranked results which will serve not only as the results of individual students, but they will also be the results of their teachers and schools in general.

In Macedonia, there were two basic standardized tests: The State Matura, which is still administered at the end of secondary school and External Assessment. However, this paper will only focus on External Assessment and its challenges.

In Macedonia the external assessment has been taken at the end of each school year by students starting from the fourth grade up to the ninth in primary schools, and from the first to the fourth year in secondary schools. It was first carried out in the school year 2010/2011 as a pilot test. In 2013, the results of the testing were published but no measures were taken against the students, teachers or schools. However, the external testing of 2014 was different – many teachers were fined because of the results of their students.

If we compare this system of assessment in Macedonia with the system of assessment in USA, we can say that external testing is similar to the ‘[National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/edlite-evaluation.html)’ which is an annual assessment of the knowledge gained by a representative sample of nearly 140,000 public and private school students in years 4, 8 and 12 in mathematics, reading, writing, the arts, natural science, U.S. history, civics, and geography’ (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/edlite-evaluation.html>) under the No Child Left Behind Act which ‘include(s) annual testing in reading/language arts and mathematics, in each of grades 3-8 and once at the high school level’ (“Standardized Assessment: A Primer”, p.11).

Nonetheless, we would say that NAEP has an advantage since it tests all students in the same two subjects: language and mathematics-which are the two basic disciplines for every individual, while External Assessment tests every student in two different subjects for instance: History and Biology, a foreign language and Geography, Mathematics and Chemistry, native language and IT and so on. So, although the testing and the results are state-ranked there is some kind of inequality because the students are not tested in the same subject and it may happen that a student who is excellent in mother tongue and Mathematics scores not very good results in two other subjects and it lowers his/her GPA.

Another thing that must be pointed out is that the USA now has a long tradition in applying standardized testing and obviously they do not have the problems that Macedonia is facing during these first years. In the last two years of External Assessment the students were ‘victims’ of inappropriately compiled questions and answers or there were questions which were translated wrong in Albanian (from Macedonian) and this created a great confusion among students, teachers and parents (E.Sh. “Dëshmi të përdhosjes së shqipes”, 2013).

These kinds of high-stakes testing such as External Assessment raise another issue related to the process of qualitative teaching. According to Popham (2011) there are “teachers who focus their teaching and classroom activities on items that are similar to the test items: *item-teaching*, and there are teachers who focus on teaching knowledge and skills based on the curriculum: *curriculum-teaching*”. This means that these kinds of standardized high-stakes tests have a bad impact on teaching if teachers use item-teaching instead of curriculum-teaching because the students do not gain the basic knowledge and skills prescribed in curricula. Unfortunately there is no conducted study on this issue in Macedonia, but from our personal experience in primary and secondary schools, we can say that most of the teachers dedicate the last few months of the school year to teaching students the items that will be in the test, meaning that they leave behind the units which have been planned in the curriculum.

Another challenge we must point here is the condition of some schools in Macedonia. There are schools that fulfill all the conditions of teaching, which are equipped with IT labs, Internet, Chemistry labs, etc. On the other hand there are some schools in remote villages that have none of these conditions and to make it worse they do not even have Internet on the testing day. So, these students are in a great disadvantage from the others that study in better schools although they are working with the same program and books.

Despite all these challenges and discontentment, the former government proceeded with their External Examination Project. However, following the elections of 2016 and the changes in government structure, changes were promised and after the governmental session of June 1, 2017, the Ministry of Education and Science stated that ‘All initiated procedures regarding the external examination of students’ knowledge are terminated’ (<http://meta.mk/ministerstvo-za-obrazovanie-eksternoto-testirane-e-ukinato/>). As a consequence, the external examination of 2017 was carried out, since it was the end of the school year and all the testing procedures had already been initiated. However, the examination was pro forma, and it had no consequences for teachers or

students. Furthermore, an open question remains: Is External examination over? Or will there be a reorganization and reformulation of such an assessment?

These are few of the many challenges that students, teachers and even parents have faced when it comes to External Assessment.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Assessment in general, and External Assessment in particular are a clue point in concluding teaching and learning as a process. To sum up, the main challenges that students in Macedonia faced, as compared to USA, were: students were not tested in the same subjects – which creates inequality; there were a lot of spelling, content and translation mistakes in the questions – which affects students' GPA; External Assessment should not affect teaching (this is an issue that requires attention and study) – but if it does, then it has a bad effect; last but not least, not all the schools have optimal conditions for administering the test – and measures should be taken immediately in order to establish equality among all students.

However, apart from the difficulties in implementing it the right way, the main idea of such an assessment is more than welcome for everybody: the students would have an idea about the knowledge and skills that they have mastered, the teachers would have a feedback on their teaching and students' needs, parents would know about their children's progress as well as policy makers would have an idea about the disadvantages of the testing so that they can change and improve education policies.

Regarding the decision of the government whether to continue with such an assessment or not, we would suggest some of these changes in order to conduct the External Assessment in the right way and receive better results:

1. Education policies should change in the way that they should be adapted to the conditions and circumstances of our community/region, not just a mere copy of other countries' policies where education is at different levels and settings
2. Teachers of primary and secondary schools should be part of the preparation of tests, because they are in direct contact with the students, their needs, their background, their knowledge, etc.
3. The supervisors of testing should be external, not internal

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