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What do Expert Teachers Think about Grading? - A Preliminary Report from Croatia

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Abstract: Assessment of students' progress is an integral part of teachers' considerations and actions. The extent to which students have acquired certain teaching content, achieved the set goals, improved their abilities or formed attitudes is assessed by teachers, parents, and education policy makers. In a large number of countries, students' progress is measured by grades, either as letter or numerical grades. Grading has been a bone of contention in pedagogical circles, as there is no consensus on the basic questions: what should be graded, when the grading process should start, what is the purpose of grading, which elements should be taken into account while grading and whether grades are necessary at all. The aim of this study was to determine the attitudes of primary school teachers to grading. A qualitative study was conducted, using the focus group (n = 8). The members of the focus group were expert teachers promoted to the ranks of teacher advisor or teacher excellent advisor. The interview was conducted as a semi-structured interview. After that, a content analysis was carried out and the results were classified into categories. The obtained results revealed that expert teachers have different experiences and opinions based on which they create various implicit pedagogical approaches to grading students.

Keywords: Expert teachers, Focus group, Grading, Students

Introduction

Education System in the Republic of Croatia

Education system in the Republic of Croatia consists of the following cycles: early childhood and preschool education, primary education, secondary education and higher education. Early childhood and preschool education includes upbringing, education and care for children at an early and preschool age. Primary education in the Republic of Croatia is compulsory and free for all children between the ages of six and fifteen. Primary school is equal for all students, lasts for eight years and is divided into lower grades (classroom teaching, student age 6 – 10 years) and higher grades (subject teaching, student age 11 – 15 years).

Secondary schools can last for three, four or five years, and in terms of the type, they can be grammar schools, vocational schools and art schools. Upon completion of primary school, students opt for different types of these schools based on their preferences and abilities. After graduating from secondary school, young people can either enter the labour market or continue their education at universities, polytechnics or other types of higher education institutions. Higher education in the Republic of Croatia, in line with the Bologna model, has three cycles - undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate level of study. Higher education is provided by universities

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and their constituents (faculties, academies, departments), polytechnics and other higher education institutions, through university and specialist study programmes.

According to the valid legal regulations (which have been in force since 1996), classroom teachers, teaching Grades 1-4, must have the qualification level of the Master of Primary Education, while subject teachers, teaching Grades 5-8, must have the qualification level of the master of a certain subject area (Croatian language, Maths, History, etc.). However, the teachers who graduated before 1996 and who earned the university title of bachelors are still employed in schools.

Professional Development of Teachers in Croatia

In Croatia, teacher professional development begins upon completing a teacher education faculty and earning a degree of the Master of Primary Education. After completing their studies, classroom teachers find employment in primary schools and start their one-year internship (in-service training). During this time, they learn about various aspects of their profession, implement the teaching process under the supervision of the assigned mentor and take a professional exam in front of the committee. During their subsequent independent work as classroom teachers, teachers can be promoted to higher ranks -those of teacher mentor, teacher advisor or teacher excellent advisor. A teacher can be promoted to the rank of teacher mentor after three years of working as a classroom teacher, providing they meet the requirements prescribed by the Ordinance on Promotion of Teachers, Expert Associates and Headmasters in Primary and Secondary Schools and Student Dormitories (OG 2019, 2020, 2021).

Promotion to the rank of teacher advisor is granted to a teacher mentor five years after the promotion to this rank, providing they meet all the requirements prescribed by the Ordinance mentioned above. If a teacher advisor meets all the necessary requirements prescribed by the Ordinance, they can be promoted to the rank of teacher excellent advisor five years after the promotion to the rank of teacher advisor. Meeting the requirements for promotion is a long, complicated and demanding task, and the one reserved for active and engaged teachers. Teachers are expected to implement activities from seven different categories: (1) organization of and/or participation in competitions and mentoring pupils, students and novice teachers; (2) delivering lectures, running workshops or carrying out training programs; (3) working in professional councils, associations, etc.; (4) publishing professional papers, teaching materials and open educational resources; (5) creating and implementing projects; (6) developing activities contributing to better school reputation and (7) performing activities which contribute to the development of the education system.

The number of points required to be promoted to each individual rank can vary – promotion to the rank of teacher mentor requires the minimum of 20 points, for teacher advisor 40, while promotion to the rank of teacher excellent advisor requires the minimum of 60 points. In addition, teachers should have 100 hours of continuing professional development during a five-year period to be promoted to the rank of teacher mentor, and 120 and 150 hours to be promoted to the ranks of teacher advisor and teacher excellent advisor, respectively. Teachers are promoted to a higher rank for a period of five years, and after that they need to file a formal request to keep the acquired rank or to be promoted to the following higher rank. As it is clear that it is not easy to meet all the criteria, it is not surprising that a smaller number of teachers decide to request promotion to a higher rank. However, numerous tasks and requirements for promotion to a higher rank indicate that the teachers who get promoted are excellent and that they perform quality work. Their engagement and work experience prove that they are experts in their fields. According to Ericsson et al. (2007), if one wishes to develop the existing practice and to become an expert, it takes at least ten years of work, patience, struggle, sacrifice, wise investment of time and focus on the tasks which are currently above the achieved level of competence.

Grading in Croatian Primary Schools

Grading student achievement is an integral part of the education process. Grading is a process of evaluation of all important facts about student achievement obtained during the process of assessment, testing and examination of students' knowledge, skills, abilities and application of the acquired knowledge (Official Gazette, 2010). Matijević (2004) defines grading as a process of assigning a certain numerical grade for the results a student has achieved, i.e., classification of students into categories depending on the achieved learning outcomes and the set criteria.

Various models of grading students have been applied in various parts of the world, but in the Croatian context, grading is a combination of summative and formative assessment. Summative assessment is used for grading student achievement in individual subjects, while formative assessment is used for grading student behaviour. Numerical grades, starting from the highest one, are excellent (5), very good (4), good (3), sufficient (2) and insufficient (1). All grades except insufficient (1) are passing grades. Students who have passing grades in all subjects can move on to a higher grade in the following school year. An exception to this rule is a student in Grades 1, 2 or 3 in primary school who, after attending remedial classes at the end of the school year, has received an insufficient (1) grade. In that case, the student in question can move on to a higher grade next school year following the decision of the Teachers' Council, based on the classroom teacher's proposal. The student is considered to have completed the previous grade but cannot move on to a higher grade two times if he/she has had an insufficient (1) grade in the same subject. The grades used for grading student behaviour are model, good, and bad (Official Gazette, 2008).

Students are graded in all subjects using numerical grades. In addition, teachers use formative assessment and provide affirmative comments in which they describe student progress. An exception to this rule are students in their first grade of primary school, who, during the first term, are not graded using numerical grades. Their knowledge, abilities and skills are graded formatively instead. Teachers can check students' progress using oral or written examinations. Oral examinations can be conducted in every lesson without prior notice, while written examinations must be scheduled beforehand. Each teacher must inform their students about the content of the exam and the form in which it will be administered (Official Gazette, 2010). Child (2021) points out that grades need to be valid, reliable, objective and standardized measures to provide quality feedback on student progress.

Kyriacou (2001) pointed out the importance of grading, listing multiple functions of a single grade: informative (it informs students, teachers and society about student achievement), motivational (it can motivate students for studying), prognostic (it can help predict future student achievement), diagnostic (it can determine the quality of student achievement), classification (it can present student achievement compared to other students' achievements) and it can be a means of advancement (it enables students to enrol in a desired secondary school or faculty, as well as to progress in the school system and society). It is believed that a grade, as feedback on student achievement, is a very important factor influencing students' emotions (Forsblom et al., 2021) and their well-being. It is expected that positive feedback (grade) will increase positive emotions in students, such as enjoyment in studying and pride in success, while negative feedback (grade), which indicates failure, will stir negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, shame and hopelessness (Pekrun et al., 2023).

Scientists point out that grades can increase fear and anxiety (Bloodgood et al., 2009) and cheating (Pulfrey & Butera, 2013), reduce the level of trust between teachers and students (Tannock, 2015), undermine collaborative learning between students (Rohe et al., 2006), and have an impact on self-esteem and self-image (Vizek Vidović et al., 2014). Teachers regularly evaluate students' abilities, and the way they grade can have critical implications on the opportunities for further education and the messages conveyed to children (Vidić & Miljković, 2023).

Grading students has been a bone of contention in pedagogical circles as there is no consensus on the fundamental questions: what should be graded, when grading should start, what is the purpose of grading, which elements should be considered while grading and whether grades are necessary or not. That is why it is very important to exchange positive experiences of teachers and to monitor and implement new knowledge in the grading process.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study was to determine the attitudes of expert teachers to grading students in primary schools in Croatia. A group interview was conducted as it, according to Halmi (2003, p. 327), "enables a dynamic interaction between more participants, which contributes to an intense, often controversial discussion on the problem, and encourages immediate reactions of participants". In line with the aim of the study, the following questions were formed:

- Q 1. What problems do teachers face when grading students?
- Q 2. How do teachers deal with parents' reactions to grades?
- Q 3. What are the teachers' suggestions for solving problems related to grading?

Method

Procedure

A qualitative research approach with the focus group was applied. Özelçi (2024) points out that a focus group interview is an interactive discussion with more than one participant who have undergone the same process, which is the case in this research. A group discussion took place in May 2024 and it lasted for 50 minutes. The discussion was recorded using a dictaphone and a camera, for which a prior consent of the participants had been obtained. In line with the ethical principles, the participants were guaranteed anonymity and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any moment.

Participants

A discussion on grading in the educational context can be implemented by forming a focus group composed of teachers who are well-acquainted with that system. The criteria for participation in the focus group included longer work experience, excellence at work and promotion to the ranks of teacher advisor or teacher excellent advisor (Table 1). In line with these criteria, a focus group was formed, consisting of expert teachers working in primary education ($N = 8$). The sample was purposive, consisting of female teachers recognized as experts in primary education by the school principals or professors at the Faculty of Teacher Education. The focus group participants were expert teachers who have been promoted to the ranks of teacher advisor ($n = 5$) or teacher excellent advisor ($n = 3$). The discussion was conducted as a semi-structured interview.

Table 1. Description of the focus group participants

Code	Gender	Place of work	Promotion rank	Education level	Age	Years of work experience
T 1	F	PST	teacher excellent advisor	bachelor's degree	58	36
T 2	F	PST	teacher excellent advisor	bachelor's degree	57	31
T 3	F	PST	teacher advisor	bachelor's degree	54	31
T 4	F	PST	teacher advisor	bachelor's degree	53	31
T 5	F	PST	teacher advisor	master's degree	56	32
T 6	F	PST	teacher excellent advisor	master's degree	50	27
T 7	F	PST	teacher advisor	master's degree	49	23
T 8	F	PST	teacher advisor	bachelor's degree	51	25

Note: T = teacher; F = female; PST = primary school teacher

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview developed by researchers was used as a method of data collection. A quantitative content analysis was performed, and the results were classified into categories. Creswell (2003) claims that content analysis is the most convenient method for the analysis of data obtained in a group interview conducted in a focus group. The results were classified into three categories. In order to increase the reliability of the analysis of the transcribed data obtained in the interview, the intercoder reliability test (Cheung & Tai, 2021) was used. This test can be applied to nominal data, such as interview data (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Two independent coders sorted the results to determine the intercoder reliability between various assessors. The obtained agreement coefficient was 0.89. Miles and Huberman (1994) state that the satisfactory value of the agreement coefficient is the one above 0.80.

Results

The obtained data were classified into 3 categories below.

Problems in Grading

Expert teachers have vast experience in grading students. Yet, all of them agree that the grading process can be challenging because grades are complex, there are numerous factors which are taken into account while grading students, and various individuals perceive grades in different ways.

“‘Very good’ as a grade has become a disaster, causing a lot of drama. The system is also to be blamed because you cannot enrol into a desired secondary school unless you have excellent grades in all subjects. Parents are also to be blamed. Parents of children at this stage of development do not see their children’s faults and believe they are all excellent students. Parents tend to view their children through grades.” (T7)

“Grading a student is not such a big problem for me. I have my own criteria I adhere to. The problem is sometimes the way in which children react, so I need to provide comprehensive explanations why someone got a very good grade on a test, and the test is easier to explain because of the points awarded for correct answers. The parents are the real problem – and their unrealistic expectations, as they do not understand how a child got a very good grade after they had studied together at home... it is good for a child not to have all excellent grades; I have elaborate grading criteria which are displayed in the classroom for children to see and me to use while grading them.” (T2)

In his study, Brlas (2004) emphasizes the fact that two thirds of teachers are dissatisfied with the current methods of grading students and that grades only partially reflect students' real knowledge and abilities. Similar results were obtained by Buljubašić Kuzmanović et al. (2010) in their research, indicating that a half of the examined teachers teaching in primary schools are not satisfied with the current methods of grading students. Teachers were asked about their grading criteria and the grades students get in the first four years of primary school.

“Students mostly get excellent grades (the highest grades, authors’ remark). On the other hand, it is not a novelty... even 15-20 years ago there were colleagues in whose classes all students had excellent grades (both in classroom and subject teaching), while I had a student who had to repeat the first grade of primary school. Then parents complained that it was different in another teacher’s class... I have changed my grading criteria since then, and it is easier for me to give an excellent grade to a student now. When children do something well, I reward them immediately. When they do not, I don’t grade them, so sometimes children are not graded throughout the entire semester as I wait for them to show their knowledge.” (T2)

“Our school is a rural school and we do not feel such pressure related to grading as is the case in urban schools, where students feel they need to get only excellent grades. As I have heard from my colleagues, all students must finish their first grade with excellent grades.” (T4)

It seems that teachers tend to form their own implicit pedagogy which they then implement in the grading process. Kapac (2008) carried out a study on teachers’ attitudes to and knowledge about grading. The findings reveal that teachers believe that the grading system is not equal in all schools and that there is no constant or verified system which would provide equal grading conditions and criteria for all students.

Vidić and Miljković (2023) carried out a study in which they examined the opinions of primary school teachers on grading and challenges related to grading that teachers come across in their teaching practice. The study was conducted on a sample consisting of 558 primary school teachers. According to the obtained results, as much as 64.8% of teachers agree with the statement that 20 years ago grading was more objective than nowadays. Furthermore, 51% of teachers believe that at that time, grades were the real indicators of students’ knowledge. A majority of teachers agree that nowadays students can get excellent grades by investing little effort (72.4%), while more than a half (53.9%) feel that in the grading process, more attention is paid to students’ emotions than their knowledge.

The results indicate that teachers perceive negativity related to grading. More than a half of the participants believe that educational institutions in charge of monitoring schools expect that students will get high grades, while 82.6% of them believe that, if parents file a formal complaint about the grade a student got, the authorities would support the parents, not the teachers. Apart from that, 71.4% of the participants perceive a climate in which any grade lower than excellent (5) is considered a bad grade. Most of teachers have not been pressured by principals or parents to alter the grade they gave to students. However, most of them have felt that kind of pressure by students (crying, begging, etc.). It is alarming that 62% of teachers feel they have not been sufficiently trained for grading during their teacher education studies. Teachers feel that in the Republic of Croatia there has been a significant increase in the number of excellent students in the last 15 or so years.

Grading criteria were also mentioned in the discussion:

“When I compare the tests I gave to my students in the past with those I give them today, those from the past were more demanding. In my school, it is a rule that all classroom teachers who teach parallel classes must

give the same tests to students. My colleagues do not want the tests that I would like to give to students. We cannot reach an agreement.” (T5)

“My colleagues and I try to have the same grading criteria at the school level. We have been creating our own tests for the majority of our teaching career. Nowadays we use the tests created by publishers, but these tests have been designed in a way which enables almost all students to get excellent grades. I do not feel I give away excellent grades easily, but, in the end, most of students do have excellent grades. It is especially easy to get them in Grades 1 and 2. Therefore, I think... excellent grades are easily achievable for all students.” (T6)

Parents and Grading

If parents should want to see the grades of their children, they can use e-Register, an online application, or come to school for parent-teacher conferences. Expert teachers were asked to describe their experiences with parents, related to the subject of grading. The thoughts and experiences they shared were diverse.

“A student’s mother told me that she did not keep up to date with the grades and teachers’ comments in the e-Register, and writing comments is a really demanding task. It is much easier to discuss the grades in person. When you write something that is not well or clearly written, the meaning can change... it requires a lot of work and effort; for each student a teacher should write...” (T1)

“I had a twin in my class (the other one was in the parallel class)... The twins were separated into different classes according to the recommendation given by the committee – one twin was more dominant, so they were separated in order to develop their own personalities. During the enrolment process, their mother agreed with the psychologist that they should be separated and that they should go to different classes. The two students have different abilities, and the parents are realistic and do not complain about me being demanding. Moreover, they said that they make copies of the additional materials I prepare for the other twin to use, who is not in my class.” (T5)

“The parents of my students regularly come to see the tests and are surprised when they see the mistakes their children made. They comment: he/she knew this at home... this as well. What should one say about it?” (T1)

“In our school, parents come to conferences with teachers, ask to see the tests and comment on them.” (T5)

“Every parent can come and state that the tests the teacher has created are too difficult, as they feel competent to do so...” (T8)

The teachers were asked if they preferred the tests created by publishers or those they create themselves. They responded that they used the publishers’ tests, although they were not satisfied with them, as these tests make them feel more secure in explaining the grades to parents. That is a sort of defence mechanism they use to prevent complaints or potential conflicts with parents.

Suggestions for Solving Problems in Grading

Expert teachers have some concrete suggestions about improving the grading process in primary education.

“The first step would be to abolish numerical grades in Grades 1 and 2.” (T2)

“I would not give grades in subjects which aim to develop certain talents – Visual Arts, Music, PE, Religious Education! These are motivating subjects, those in which effort is graded...” (T6)

“I would not give grades in these subjects later on either.” (T5)

“I don’t know who is blocking the abolishment of grades... Ever since I started working, there has been a lot of discussion about abolishing grades. We all agree that it would be a good decision, all teachers would support it, but it has not been implemented yet...” (T8)

Regarding grading students in primary education, teachers believe that it is necessary to introduce changes and they analyse critically the currently used methods of grading. They think that summative grading should not be applied in Grades 1 and 2, or even later, and also emphasize the problem of grading students in subjects aimed at developing talents and skills. This can be supported by the findings of the study carried out by Štemberger and Petrušič (2017) on a sample of 855 teachers from 189 primary schools in Slovenia, aimed at obtaining opinions of teachers on grading students in Physical Education in the first (students in Grades 1 – 3) and the second (students in grades 4 – 6) triad.

The findings indicate that the largest number of teachers would use formative assessment instead of grading students in Physical Education in the first triad, and summative assessment in the second triad. It is interesting to point out that as much as 11.2% of teachers who teach in the first triad feel that students should not be graded at all in this subject. Similar opinions regarding grading students in Physical Education were obtained by teachers who were teaching this subject in the second triad – 15.6% of them would not grade students in PE in the first triad.

“I like the idea of showing student achievement using percentage. I feel that, when I write 15/17 points and that is 88% for example, it is different than 91%... for parents, it is clear and logical why the child got a very good grade (4). They do not discuss the grade with me so much, or why 14/17 is a very good grade (4).” (T2)

“I was thinking about what 91% means to a parent, not 75%... When I write a positive formative assessment comment in the e-Register, I see that parents do not understand the terminology (for example, they do not differentiate between the verbs recognize and apply)... that is why I have decided to write the number of points a student earned on a test, the percentage of correct answers for an individual student and the percentage of correct answers for the entire class. And parents do not have questions anymore...” (T6)

Others nod in agreement and confirm it is a good strategy, while one participant points out that experts learn from other experts in this discussion, because she has just had an idea. Brkić-Devčić (2002) claims that summative assessment is almost detrimental to children at all levels of education, since it reduces the entire student’s personality to a single number. Singer (1985) claims that grades should be abolished because they are in opposition to the basic pedagogical principles. They discourage students, cause fear, are not objective and provide little information on students’ abilities.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper we presented the opinions of 8 experts, primary school teachers, on grading students. The findings show that the participants are dissatisfied with the currently used methods of grading. All expert teachers who participated in the focus group have similar opinions on grading in primary school, regardless of their prior education level (bachelor's degree/master's degree). The participants pointed out that a majority of students get only excellent grades (5), while any grade lower than that is considered unacceptable, both by students and their parents. Grading criteria change over time within the same school, they are different in different school, and teachers themselves change them over the years. For the purpose of grading students, some teachers create their own tests, while others use those that can be found on the market and which were created by publishers who publish textbooks and other teaching materials. After critically examining the possibility of using the tests available on the market, they conclude that because the parents question the difficulty level of the tests created by teachers themselves, a significant number of teachers tend to use easier and less demanding tests created by publishers. Some concrete suggestions provided by teachers include introducing summative assessment at a later stage of education (from Grades 3 or 5 in primary school), abolishment of summative assessment in subjects such as Visual Arts, Music, Physical Education and Religious Education, and using percentages when reporting on student achievement.

Based on the conducted interview and the analysis of the obtained data, it is obvious that it is necessary to evaluate the validity of the current method of grading. Apart from teachers, it would be useful to include scientists specializing in docimology, pedagogues and psychologists, as well as policy makers in the field of education. Only a quality analysis of the current state of affairs and the implementation of new knowledge in the field of docimology can lead to positive changes. A great value of this research lies in the fact that although the participants were expert teachers with many years of work experience in teaching and grading students, they recognized this meeting as an opportunity for lifelong learning and an exchange of useful experiences.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS Journal belongs to the authors.

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