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How are students assessed in a cooperative learning environment?

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Introduction

Assessments are an essential tool used by teachers to determine if their students have learned the taught material and if they can apply their knowledge to answer questions relating to that subject. After giving these assessment to students, the teachers are then required to see where the students have made mistakes and figure out a way to fill any gaps in the following classes. Through this process, the teachers have all the tools they need to help the whole class fully grasp the subject and be able to use that knowledge beyond the classroom. However, the purpose of assessments has changed over time due to the competitive nature of schooling. The goal of the student is not learning the subjects and enjoy doing so because they just want to pass the test with the highest marks possible in order to proceed to the next level of education. This phenomenon could shift if the schooling system was more cooperative and focused on the collective success of the class instead of the focused on the top students. This could be achieved through cooperative assessments that encourage the students to participate as a group instead of an individual. In this essay, competitive assessments, such as standardised tests and end of year examinations, will be compared to cooperative assessments, such as peer reviews and student teams-achievement divisions. Additionally, their impact in the classroom environment will be explored and analysed.

Competitive Assessment Methods

The most commonly used assessment in second level education are the end of year examinations which are meant to determine whether the students have learned all the material they were taught over the course of the school year. This is a perfect example which illustrates how the goal of assessments is no longer to assist the teacher in improving their teaching methods and understanding in which areas to assist their students. This goal is not met since the students will transition to a new class with new teachers and the gaps from last year will not necessarily be filled. Furthermore, the end of year examinations influence how the students are learning because they become hyper focused on how to pass their exams rather than truly understanding the subjects taught to them. For example, as shown in the Koretz et al. (1991) study, “high levels of attainment on a high-stakes test did not necessarily translate into high levels of achievement on other types of test” (Aysel, 2012). This means that even though the students have learned how to successfully pass a test in their school, they would not be properly equipped to take a different test on the same topic or even use their knowledge in a different, real-life scenario. Thus, the students do not actually retain the information or skills they received from their classroom and are not able to apply them in situations that are not familiar to them. Therefore, the end of year examinations are not always showing what a student really learned but rather, they show how capable students are at completing exams.

It could be argued that the use of assessments in the classroom has lost some of its value due to assessments such as standardised tests. These tests are meant “measure a child’s reading and mathematical achievement, and to determine children’s progress in those areas” (NCCA, 2005). However, due to the fact that these examinations are conducted outside of school and their results are used to compare students on a larger scale, the teachers are not given the papers back so they do not have the opportunity to determine in which areas the students are lacking. This means that these competitive assessments are not as helpful in assisting the teachers educate their class more substantially. One counterclaim is that “this form of assessment provide[s] teachers with a complementary source of information regarding student achievement” (Namara, 2010). However, due to the vagueness of the grades awarded, it is not detailed enough for the teacher to help the students substantially.

Additionally, standardised tests like the SAT and TOEFL are predominantly used by universities to decide if students have high enough marks to enroll in their programs. This level of competition is not only hurting the students which undergo a great amount of stress while preparing for these tests, but it also impacts the classroom environment. That is because more focus is placed on learning the necessary material to pass the test which leaves little to no room for more meaningful learning and slight deviations from the curriculum that would be of more interest to the students.

Cooperative Assessment Methods

After taking into consideration the competitive assessment methods that are used currently in most schools around the world, it is time to explore the cooperative assessment methods which could be implemented in the future to ensure the proper education of the whole classroom. One cooperative assessment method is peer review in group projects and assignments. Specifically students have to review each other's work so that the teacher can assess the final outcome along with the contribution of each individual. Peer reviews involve the students grading the members of their group based on their performance and involvement in the team effort. The teacher, in a peer review assessment, could ask questions like:

1. Did this member "contribute positively in group discussions"?
2. Did this member "work well with other group members"?
3. Did this member "complete work on time"?
4. Did this member "work accurately and completely"? (Manis, 2019)

These questions place focus on teamwork and communication so peer review assessments reward students based on their willingness to not only help others but also work hard towards a joint cause. Some might argue that in peer reviews, students might judge each other unfairly due to their own biases thus presenting an unrealistic representation of other's contribution to the team. However, this could be easily avoided if the teacher takes into consideration the peer reviews from all the members of the team. Additionally, if the teacher allows the students to work on their group projects in some classes, they can easily observe the group dynamic and take notes on each member's contribution to the team effort. Overall, this method encourages

learning and collaboration instead of placing focus only on the final outcome.

Another effective way of assessing students in a cooperative learning environment is through the Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD). This method consists of the teacher assigns students “to four-member learning teams which are mixed in performance level, sex and ethnicity” (Slavin, 2010). The students’ responsibility is to make sure that all the members of the team understood the lesson. Everyone is then given a quiz or test that they have to complete individually without the assistance of their teammates. The teacher then awards the team based on if the individuals met or surpassed results they had previously received and the scores are then added together to give the group a collective grade. This is a helpful method for all the students to learn the subject because they are all responsible for each other’s success. Additionally, it creates bonds between the students and a sense of security because they can depend on each other to succeed as a group. Some might argue that since the students are assessed individually, there is still a level of competition between the members of the group. However, it is crucial to highlight that the teacher in this case does not reward the students based on how well they performed but by how much they have improved. Additionally, the members of the group must work collaboratively to ensure that everyone is comfortable with the material taught in the class which makes this a group effort that is more engaging than having to revise alone. Lastly, everyone in the group is learning and revising no matter if they are the ones helping the other members or being helped which is another testament to the effectiveness of this method.

Personal Reflection

From personal experience and from the information I have gathered from peers and relatives who either attend or work in public schools in Cyprus, few schools use cooperative assessment methods. There is always a preference towards the competitive methods considering that this is how most schools determine their student's success and is how universities determine who can enroll in their courses. Additionally, cooperative assessment methods are often dismissed because students are punished for the mistakes others make rather than being rewarded for collaboration and teamwork. Specifically, the students are only marked for final product they produce as a team rather than the process of working collectively to reach that outcome and how they helped each other learn the required material.

However, in the private high school I attended, cooperative assessment methods were used to a greater extent and students were urged to collaborate more often. The teachers would be extremely creative and gave us projects that would excite us such as creating a song or a short video to show what we have learned. Another collaborative assessment method I found to be extremely beneficial is that as a team, we had to teach the rest of our peers the topics we learned in class. That way, not only did we have to fully grasp everything we were taught, but we also had to make sure that the rest of our class learned also.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even though competitive methods of assessment are used predominantly in schools to determine the students' knowledge and understanding of subjects taught in school, they are not necessarily the most useful when it comes to assisting in the collective education of a classroom. It is shown that due to these competitive assessment, the teacher and the students could lose sight of what is important in their education. Thus, instead of the students focusing on fully engaging with the taught material and asking questions that lead them to learn information that interests them, they would rather focus on successfully completing their assessments in order to proceed to the next level of education which would be just a repetition of the same steps. Rather than being able to enjoy the journey of learning through cooperative assessments that encourage teamwork and build communication skills, students are forced to solely focus on the final outcome of assessments that do not always reveal how well they have mastered a topic. Thus, due to the lack of cooperative assessments in the classroom, it is likely that students lose their love of learning since they are constantly faced with the pressure of having to be successful in every assessment and having to be the best amongst their peers.

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