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Core Issues in Assessing Students in the Context of Force Majeure

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Abstract

This research paper aims to examine and address core challenges faced by teachers in assessing students in the context of *force majeure*, such as the *COVID-19 pandemic*, within the Kosovo education system, a period in which the rules for student assessment had either been changed or imposed by central government directives. As an unprecedented global crisis, the pandemic disrupted life in all aspects; this was a new period everyone was obliged to live in, and the pandemic unfortunately affected life in all its aspects. Education, a fundamental pillar and source of societal development, was caught largely unprepared to handle the teaching system at all levels, and to shift to remote format of teaching classes, handling homework, exercises, and assessments. This study investigates why student evaluation is pedagogically critical, how English teachers in Kosovo high schools navigated assessment during remote, and which methods they employed under pandemic conditions. As with any similar crisis and *force majeure* situation, the long-term consequences of this period are likely to extend far beyond initial expectations.

Findings indicate that, despite the extraordinary and highly unnatural circumstances, the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) in Kosovo managed, in a short time, to organise remote teaching via TV channels, Zoom, Teams, and Google Classroom. Such management was considered a success, as it eased teachers' work and their interactions with students. However, when it came to student assessment, the entire system was subject to centrally provided instructions from the Government, which dictated the assessment methods and their outcomes. Some of the respondents have claimed that during this period they "were expected to grant only positive grades" and that "the final grade had to be the same or not lower than the existing grade granted before March 11 (MESTI, 2020). For many teachers, such directives conflicted with fundamental principles of fair assessment.

Keywords: assessment, pandemic, formative method, remote learning, English teacher

Introduction

Assessing students during force majeure situations can be challenging and require specialised knowledge and care. It is rare for the world to face a global crisis *and force majeure*. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness, learn about the different forms and manifestations of force majeure, and understand how nations should manage them within their abilities and capacities. A force majeure (fors māzhər), according to Black's Law Dictionary [Law French "a superior force"] (1883) is an event or effect that can be neither anticipated nor controlled; esp., an unexpected event that prevents someone from doing or completing something that he or she had agreed or officially planned to do (Reuters, 2024).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the teaching process and assessment have been mainly dictated by instructions and decisions issued at the central level, as well as by the approaches adopted to sustain the educational system in the most affected countries. The responsibility for education has primarily fallen to families (parents and guardians) and students themselves. However, in the process, there have been many challenges, ranging from IT literacy to economic conditions, space availability, fatigue from remote learning (both for teachers and students), and support from family members.

This research aims to investigate and study the methods teachers have used at the assessment stage, whether they have focused on formative, summative, or a combination of both (queried indirectly), or whether they have used alternative methods to make an effective, efficient, and ethical assessment. The study has been conducted through a survey and one-to-one interviews with High School English teachers in the Municipalities of Prishitna and Prizren. As a foundation, the document produced by the MESTI of the Government of Kosovo was also used, based on which all teachers were instructed on their assessment methods, the results they had to produce, and how those clashed with the reality in their virtual classes.

As Derek Rowtree stated, assessment methods can largely determine what and how students learn, and therefore, it is vital for all teachers to use appropriate methods that align with the factual educational purposes (Rowtree, 1987). It is widely believed that learning and assessment are closely interlinked, with assessment the outcome of teaching and often the result of both the student and the teacher. According to a study found in Innovative Assessment in Higher Education by Cordelia Bryan and Karen Clegg, "modern society is demanding and complex" (Clegg, 2006). Moreover, regardless of the situation we are living in, according to

Andreas Schleicher, “assessment methods should not change, and they should be basic in their nature” (Schleicher, 2020).

However, although it is a very sound judgment to conclude that assessment methods should not change, encounters with situations such as Covid-19 have proved the opposite. The assessment methods not only had to be changed, but the entire education system had to be adapted to the needs and circumstances pertaining thereto. According to Andreas Schleicher, “in many countries, lockdowns were immediately introduced in response to Covid-19, and in many schools, the conventional schooling was interrupted, and alternative education or schooling was tried. Countries used a variety of resources to support students’ learning, using several tools to reach as many students as possible. Online platforms were the most popular tool used during school closures” (Schleicher, 2020).

There remains a huge question mark whether the purpose of teaching is being achieved by remote learning. Are the students benefiting from these adapted teaching methodologies, and is the assessment of students demonstrating their progress, development, lack of progress, or stagnation in their education and learning processes? Many of the respondents in this study fear that the impact of these circumstances will be mirrored in future years, possibly even years later, and that unless assessment is permitted in the same way as under normal circumstances, the consequences will be significant. Many respondents have referred to the obligation to comply with the Government’s instructions in student assessment, as well as to unwritten or verbal instructions from school principals or Municipal Directories to impose only positive grading (Schleicher, 2020).

At the global level, a recent survey was conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Harvard University on the education conditions in countries and the approaches adopted to sustain educational opportunity during the pandemic. It has been found that “the learning that had taken place during the period when schools were closed was at best only a small proportion of what students would have learned in school” (Schleicher, 2020).

In general and under normal circumstances, there are two primary forms of student assessment: formative or summative, or a combination of both. Indeed, an exam at the end of the term shall contribute to the teacher’s decision regarding the student’s success, which constitutes a summative assessment. At the same time, the teacher’s comments on a student’s homework or their response to remarks in class indicate a formative assessment (Rowtree, 1987). However, whether teachers

have used only these forms of assessment, what their response to Covid circumstances has been, and why they found this part of teaching challenging and stressful are still areas that need further exploration and elaboration.

As one of the respondents in this study stated very well, “the purpose of assessment is to gather information about students’ performance and progress to specific learning objectives. Often, the assessments cannot be 100% real, especially when students take tests, as they cannot show their knowledge through that test because they get stressed and they have a time limit”. Further, this teacher stated that she had cases where brilliant students got a 3 or 4 on a test, but given that she would get to know her students very well, she would always give them a chance to try themselves by asking further questions on grammar to raise the grade. The pandemic, however, has limited the interaction with students. Some classes were organised initially only through TV sessions, and later the Zoom platform and Google Classroom were introduced. The same teacher stated that this year, during the pandemic, along with her other English teachers, they decided to assess homework at 30%, participation at 10%, class engagement at 10%, and a group project at 50% for the final grade. However, after the Department of Education of the Municipality of Prishtina set a rule that prevented them from lowering their previous grades, they could no longer rely on those percentages. Therefore, their assessment could not rely on students’ actual performance or progress, but had to be subject to the instructions issued by government authorities.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify how teachers have adapted their teaching and assessment practices and the challenges they have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose is not only identification of ways and methods they have used, to help their students learn more and achieve a great success in language acquisition and general learning of English Language and Literature, but also to help teachers learn of their peers’ experiences and take the necessary steps and measures to be prepared for another wave of the pandemic or another year of online teaching and remote assessment of students, so that education system does not fail, it is not deteriorated, and the end product is not a generation who passed a class just for the sake of passing it and because we all lived under the same sky which was conquered by the invisible enemy called Corona Virus.

Methodology

The methodology used for this study has been qualitative research, including an analysis of the Document produced by the Government, namely the Ministry of Education, titled “Instruction on the Assessment of Students during distance learning,” as well as interviews with English teachers from high schools in Prishtina and the Prizren region. I have also used an open survey with questions (similar to those discussed during interviews) addressed to English teachers, from which a certain number of responses were received. Literature reviews and studies on educational institutions’ responses to COVID-19 and the measures taken to address the most challenging aspect of the teaching and learning process, such as student assessment, were also considered.

Findings and Results

The interviews and survey conducted for this research produced several significant findings regarding assessment practices and methods used during the COVID-19 pandemic across Kosovo’s high schools. First, teachers consistently reported that assessment procedures were entirely dependent on instructions issued by the central government, namely the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. In particular, they were prohibited from granting lower grades than the ones already given before 11th March. Teachers interviewed in this study state that they not only had to comply with this written instruction, but also had to comply with the “verbal order” not to fail any student. As a result, negative grades were effectively forbidden.

Second, all teachers expressed concerns about the integrity and authenticity of student work. They observed that homework and assignments were frequently shared among students, making it difficult to determine authorship and to assess individual achievement reliably. Consequently, many educators felt that no genuine or valid assessment could be conducted under such circumstances.

Third, respondents highlighted inadequate support from parents or guardians, citing limitations in intellectual capacity, economic hardship, and insufficient IT literacy. These structural barriers further impede meaningful assessment and hinder students’ engagement with remote learning.

According to the official document produced by the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation, the primary purpose of assessment, in compliance

with the Curriculum Framework (2016), is to support student learning. The document further emphasised that this goal, along with the principles of evaluation for distance learning, should guide the distance assessment process. The document emphasised that distance assessment should prioritise essential learning outcomes, student well-being, and encouragement rather than rigorous measurement of what students had learned. However, recommendations were given that in the circumstances created by the COVID-19 Pandemic, it is recommended to assess what is essential for the tasks, commitments, practical activities and learning outcomes related to the type of learning that takes place and approaches to teaching applied during distance learning and that emphasis should be placed in the well-being of students, encouraging them to learn more, rather than assess what they have learned (MESTI, 2020).

Despite these guidelines, several respondents reported that they “were expected to grant only positive grades” and that “the final grade had to be the same or not lower than the existing grade granted before March 11” (MESTI, 2020). For many teachers, such directives conflicted with fundamental principles of fair assessment, which require accuracy, transparency, and the ability to differentiate levels of student achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998). By restricting teachers’ evaluative autonomy, the policy not only undermined their professional judgement but also risked distorting the learning process. Restricting teachers’ evaluative autonomy not only compromised the integrity of the assessment process but also limited their ability to provide differentiated, evidence-based feedback. Research consistently shows that as implied by studies on assessment and learning conducted by scholars such as Richard Stiggins and Wynne Harlen, when grades are inflated or disconnected from performance, the credibility of assessment is undermined, weakening both accountability and instructional planning (Stiggins, 2005; Harlen, 2012).

Teachers also expressed concern about the motivational consequences of mandated grade inflation. If grades did not reflect genuine effort or competency, students had limited incentive to engage meaningfully with instructional materials, participate in online activities, or develop new skills during remote learning. In this sense, the requirement to award only positive grades may have inadvertently diminished both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, undermined the formative purpose of assessment, and potentially exacerbated existing learning gaps. These findings illustrate the significant tension between crisis-driven policy decisions and pedagogical integrity, revealing long-term implications for learning quality. If grades no longer reflected actual performance, students had limited incentives to engage

meaningfully with instructional materials, complete assignments, or develop skills during remote learning. In this sense, the requirement to award only positive grades may have inadvertently weakened students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, reduced the formative value of assessment, and potentially widened existing learning gaps. These findings reveal significant tensions between crisis-driven policy mandates and pedagogical integrity, highlighting the long-term implications of assessment decisions made under emergency conditions.

Analysis of the interviews and survey data further indicated that the reality teachers have faced is entirely different from the polished image of remote learning presented or shown on TV classes. Although the government introduced new platforms and promoted innovative approaches to distance education, the transition from classroom-based to online learning remained challenging for teachers, students, and families alike. The difficulties encountered ranged from limited access to technology and internet connectivity to varying levels of IT literacy among both students and parents.

The shift to remote learning may be understood through the framework of "flexible learning," as conceptualised by Jeff Moonen and Betty Collins (Moonen, 2001). According to Huang et al. (2020), flexible learning is characterized by (1) offering learners diverse pathways and choices, and (2) adopting a learner-centred, constructivist approach in which responsibility for learning shifts from the teacher to the student. It is thereto stated that flexible learning first of all "offers learners rich learning choices from multiple dimensions of study. Second, it applies a learner-centred constructivist approach, as indicated by a shift from the teacher taking on learning responsibilities to the learner taking them on. Therefore, flexible learning requires learners to be more skilled at self-regulation in terms of goal setting, self-monitoring, and making adjustments and instructors to promote active learning so that learning in such situations can be engaging and effective" (Huang et al, 2020). According to this study, the burden of success in remote schooling must fall on learners (students), not on the teacher. Consequently, the assessment should reflect how much effort students have put into their learning.

Within this conceptual framework, the burden of success in remote schooling rests largely on families (parents and guardians) or, even more specifically, on students alone rather than teachers. Consequently, assessment should reflect not merely compliance with centrally issued instructions but the degree to which students demonstrate responsibility, effort, and authentic engagement with the learning process during distance education.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the assessment practices implemented in Kosovo during the COVID-19 pandemic were shaped more by centralised directives and crisis management than by pedagogical principles. In general, the impression is that remote teaching was challenging not only for teachers but also for the students and their families. Assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kosovo was difficult and could not accurately measure students' learning. One of the teachers in the survey stated that she was not sure if they assessed all their students at the end of the school year, as they had to assess them only based on their homework. Another teacher stated that it was "obvious that homework was being shared among students". It is difficult to assess students from a distance because some copy their homework from others; they join the class and stay active, but they do not listen or answer voluntarily. Moreover, you immediately notice that they did not understand the topic because they were either sleeping or doing something else, another teacher implied. Therefore, while the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation acted swiftly to ensure continuity of instruction through remote platforms, the imposed assessment guidelines—particularly the expectation to avoid negative grades, maintain pre-existing scores, and pass all students—placed teachers in a position where their professional judgement and the validity of evaluation processes were significantly constrained. Evidence from interviews and survey data reveals that such directives not only conflicted with widely accepted standards of fair and reliable assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Stiggins, 2005; Harlen, 2012) but also reduced the motivational value of grades by weakening the connection between effort, performance, and achievement.

The results show that remote teaching was challenging not only for teachers but also for students and families. In particular, it is therefore established that assessment during the Covid-19 pandemic in Kosovo has been difficult and has not been able to measure students' learning outcomes. The discrepancy between the polished image of remote teaching presented through televised lessons and the difficult realities experienced by teachers, students, and families further underscores the systemic challenges of emergency remote education. Limited technological resources, varying levels of digital literacy, and disparities in home support created inequitable learning conditions that assessment policies failed to adequately address, as theories of flexible and learner-centred education suggest (Moonen, 2001; Huang et al., 2020). Remote learning places greater responsibility on students for self-regulation, engagement, and persistence. Yet the grading policies during the

pandemic shifted accountability away from learners, resulting in assessments that neither differentiated achievement nor captured meaningful learning.

Asked what assessment was, one teacher stated that “assessment is the systematic collection of data, review and use of information about the educational program, in order to improve students’ learning. “Knowing where they have done well and where they need to make great efforts”, – implied another one.

Most of the teachers stated that they were not aware of any action plan for managing crises in education during the pandemic, and that the only official document produced for this purpose was the Ministry of Education’s Instruction on Assessment of Students during the pandemic. There was an obvious fatigue felt during interviews with teachers. The majority of them considered the solution to saving the education system and the generation of students to be “getting back to school” or using only “formative assessment”. One English teacher from a High School in Prizren stated in the Survey that formative assessment is better, as it requires continual monitoring of students’ development and progress, rather than assessing their knowledge only at the end of the period or semester. She further maintained that “interacting more with students” is crucial to encouraging them to speak more, learn more, and get engaged in class, with the aim of learning and developing their skills and capacities in English. In other words, assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning would be the most appropriate approach, as also advised by the MESTI, which encourages them to learn more rather than assess what they have learned (MESTI, 2020).

The findings of this research, therefore, highlight a crucial tension between policy-driven crisis responses and pedagogical integrity. They demonstrate that while extraordinary circumstances necessitate flexibility, assessment must remain grounded in principles that uphold accuracy, fairness, and student growth. Looking forward, the education system in Kosovo would benefit from developing crisis-responsive assessment frameworks that balance empathy with professional standards and approach, support every teacher’s professional autonomy, and preserve the motivational and instructional value of evaluation. Only through such measures can future disruptions – such as pandemic-related or other unknown force majeure - be navigated in ways that safeguard learning outcomes and educational equity for all students.

To conclude, as most respondents have stated, teachers are not challenged by the assessment of their students’ learning; however, it is necessary to take all measures,

and therefore it is recommended to have action plans in place and to update them as society, technology, and infrastructure evolve. Moreover, it is recommended to establish a strategy with an action plan and a task force to ensure adequate preparation. Preparation can only take place after proper induction and training on the management of such similar situations because everyone should be ready for another wave of the pandemic or another year of online teaching, and that for only one reason - so that the education system does not fail.

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