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THE OPINION OF CLASS TEACHERS ON THE MOST APPROPRIATE METHODS OF ASSESSING PHYSICAL EDUCATION

MNENJE RAZREDNIH UČITELJEV O NAJPRIMERNEJŠIH VRSTAH OCENJEVANJA PREDMETA ŠPORT

ABSTRACT

Assessment is vital in education, allowing teachers to evaluate students' achievements and promote their development. In physical education (PE), assessment measures motor skills and emphasizes physical activity's importance for health and well-being. In Slovenia, PE has traditionally been an assessed subject, with this study focusing on classroom teachers' opinions about the most suitable assessment methods in elementary schools.

Data were collected from 68 classroom teachers via an online survey between November 2021 and January 2022. Teachers shared their preferences for PE assessment methods using a five-point Likert scale. The majority (61.8%) preferred verbal grading (e.g., "very successful"), 20.6% preferred descriptive grading, and 17.6% chose numerical grading (1–5).

Compared to past studies, preferences for descriptive assessment have declined, while verbal assessment has gained popularity. Numerical grading remains less favored. Interestingly, verbal grading, preferred by most teachers, is not currently used in Slovenia due to the nine-year elementary school system. This reveals a significant gap between teachers' preferences and legally mandated assessment methods.

The study highlights a concerning lack of understanding among teachers about the characteristics and purposes of different assessment methods, as well as insufficient familiarity with the Rules for the assessment and grading of knowledge and the progression of pupils in elementary school. It emphasizes the need for additional support and training for teachers in assessing PE.

While classroom teachers possess the skills to manage all subjects, this does not ensure their confidence or competence in delivering high-quality lessons in specialized areas like physical education.

Keywords: Knowledge, Types of Assessment, Assessment in Education

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IZVLEČEK

Ocenjevanje je v pedagoškem procesu ključno, saj omogoča učiteljem, da spremljajo dosežke učencev in spodbujajo njihov razvoj. Pri predmetu šport se ocenjuje predvsem znanje, manj pa drugi, t. i. nekognitivni cilji, ki so prav tako bistvenega pomena za pouk (npr. razvoj gibalnih sposobnosti, oblikovanje stališč, navad in vedenjskih vzorcev). Šport je v Sloveniji tradicionalno ocenjevan predmet, ta raziskava pa se osredotoča na mnenja razrednih učiteljev o najprimernejših načinih ocenjevanja tega predmeta v osnovni šoli.

V raziskavi je sodelovalo 68 razrednih učiteljev, podatki pa so bili v okviru nacionalne evalvacijske študije zbrani prek spletne ankete med novembrom 2021 in januarjem 2022. Učitelji so svoje preference glede vrst ocenjevanja izražali na petstopenjski Likertovi lestvici. Večina (61,8 %) je podprla besedno ocenjevanje (npr. »zelo uspešno«), 20,6 % se je odločilo za opisno ocenjevanje, 17,6 % pa za številčno ocenjevanje (1–5).

V primerjavi s preteklimi raziskavami so se preference za opisno ocenjevanje zmanjšale, medtem ko je priljubljenost besednega ocenjevanja narasla. Številčno ocenjevanje bi še vedno uporabilo najmanj učiteljev. Zanimivo je, da se besedno ocenjevanje, ki ga podpira večina učiteljev, v Sloveniji ne uporablja od uvedbe devetletne osnovne šole. To kaže na velik razkorak med zakonsko določenimi vrstami ocenjevanja in željami učiteljev.

Raziskava izpostavlja pomanjkljivo razumevanje učiteljev o značilnostih in namenih različnih vrst ocenjevanja ter nezadostno poznavanje Pravilnika o preverjanju in ocenjevanju znanja ter napredovanju učencev v OŠ. Poudarja potrebo po dodatnem strokovnem usposabljanju in podpori učiteljev za učinkovito ocenjevanje pri predmetu šport.

Ključne besede: znanje, vrste ocenjevanja, ocenjevanje v izobraževanju

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a central aspect of the educational process, enabling teachers to identify and evaluate how well students are achieving the objectives and standards of knowledge set out in the curriculum (Pravilnik o preverjanju in ocenjevanju znanja ter napredovanju učencev v osnovni šoli, 2013). In physical education (PE), assessment is important not only to evaluate the development of students' motor abilities and motor skills, but also to promote the importance of physical activity and sport for students' health and well-being (Kovač et al., 2011).

Across Europe, PE is a compulsory subject for both primary and lower secondary school, and most countries assess students' progress in PE in a similar way to other subjects. Nevertheless, there are differences in grading methods. In Malta and Norway, for example, students must participate in PE at primary level and in Ireland at both primary and lower secondary level without formal assessment. Most European countries provide clear guidelines for assessment techniques in PE, while some, such as Belgium and Iceland, give schools the freedom to choose their assessment methods (Eurydice, 2013).

In Slovenia, PE has traditionally been an assessed subject. Until the 1970s, a numerical grading scale of five points was used (Kristan, 1992). From 1975 onwards, PE, together with school subjects such as music, art, technology and home economics, was assessed using a verbal grading scale with three levels: »less successful«, »successful« and »very successful«. These subjects were commonly referred to as »educational subjects« to emphasize that the focus was on personal development rather than just academic success. The introduction of verbal grading was seen as a more reliable and less sensitive method compared to numerical grading, which could more accurately reflect minor individual differences in student performance (Žveglič Mihelič, 2017).

With the introduction of the nine-year primary school system in 1996, both descriptive and numerical assessment were introduced in Slovenian schools (Pravilnik o preverjanju in ocenjevanju znanja ter napredovanju učencev v osnovni šoli, 1996). Currently, according to the regulations (Pravilnik o preverjanju in ocenjevanju znanja ter napredovanju učencev v osnovni šoli, 2013), descriptive assessment is used in the first and second grade, while numerical assessment is introduced in all subjects from the third to the ninth grade. Descriptive assessment describes a student's progress in relation to the objectives or knowledge standards set in the curriculum and highlights both achievements and areas for improvement (Razdevšek Pučko, 1999). This method of assessment aims to promote students' development by actively involving

them in tracking and evaluating their learning and allowing them to set realistic goals, plan their upcoming work and realistically assess their progress (Razdevšek Pučko, 2008).

Although it has theoretical advantages, descriptive assessment brings practical difficulties. Teachers frequently find it labor intensive, struggle with appropriate vocabulary and sometimes fail to include unmet standards in their assessments (Pezdirc, 2012; Polak, 2008; Polajžer, 2013; Kranjčec, 2014). On the other hand, numerical assessment allows for easy comparison between students and provides a general representation of success or failure (Blažič et al., 2003; Žveglič Mihelič, 2017). However, it cannot adequately capture the subtleties of individual progress and can lead to increased stress for students.

These ongoing difficulties highlight the need for systematic research to guide and refine PE assessment practices. In Slovenia, such efforts formally began around 2000 with the project "Design and Evaluation of the National Knowledge Test in Physical Education" (Dežman et al., 2000 in Majerič, 2004; Kovač, 2002). Although this initiative spurred further investigation into PE assessment, there has been limited practical uptake of its findings. For example, Majerič (2004) noted persistent ambiguity concerning the specific objectives and criteria that teachers use to evaluate student performance. In addition, Kovač and Jurak (2023) found that teachers have not fully grappled with the complexities of PE assessment, partly due to minimal professional attention devoted to this area. Instead, classroom teachers often rely on personal strategies or more established methods from other subjects, sometimes neglecting PE assessment because it is traditionally viewed as less significant.

In light of these challenges and the changing educational environment, it is crucial to understand teachers' views on assessment strategies in PE. Their preferences and the motivations behind them can guide policy and professional development and ultimately improve assessment practice in PE.

The aim of this study was therefore to investigate classroom teachers' opinions on the most appropriate methods for assessing PE in Slovenian primary school. Specifically, the study aimed to 1) identify the preferred assessment methods of PE, 2) assess changes over time by examining whether teachers' views on the type of assessment in PE have changed compared to previous studies, and 3) analyze the reasons for teachers' preferences for or against certain assessment methods, including numerical, descriptive, and verbal assessment.

METHODS

Data collection

The data for this article are drawn from a national evaluation study titled Analysis of the appropriateness of numerical grading in PE, music and visual arts (Tekavc et al., 2023). This evaluation combined quantitative and qualitative methods and examined perceptions among students, teachers, and school leaders in Slovenian primary schools. The study utilized a two-stage stratified random sampling method, selecting a 10.57% sample (48 schools) of the total population of Slovenian primary schools in the 2020/2021 school year. This ensured proportional representation from all 12 statistical regions.

The data was collected between November 2021 and January 2022 via the online survey platform 1KA. Teachers completed the questionnaires independently, taking approximately 10 to 12 minutes per respondent. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was assured.

Participants

For our study, a focused analysis was conducted on a subset of 68 classroom teachers who participated in the national evaluation. These teachers provided data specific to their opinions on the assessment methods in PE. Of these, 97.1% were female, and 2.9% were male. The average age of the participants was 44.4 years (SD = 8.4), ranging from 27 to 62 years. The average length of professional experience was 20.1 years (SD = 9.4), ranging from 2 to 39 years.

Instruments

Structured questionnaires were designed for teachers, students, and school leaders as part of the national evaluation. For this analysis, the teacher questionnaire was used, which included items measuring demographic variables, opinions on assessment methods, and attitudes toward assessment in PE. Responses were captured using a five-point Likert scale, with pilot testing conducted in June 2021 to ensure reliability and validity.

Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28.0. Descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize demographic characteristics and survey responses. The results were interpreted to address the

research focus of this article, which centered on teachers' perceptions of assessment methods in PE.

In addition, we analyzed the open-ended responses provided by the teachers. This involved a thematic analysis of the open-ended responses provided by the teachers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative data were first read in full to gain familiarity and then systematically coded line-by-line using an inductive coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Emerging codes were grouped into broader categories and refined into key themes that captured teachers' perspectives on various grading methods.

RESULTS

Preferred methods of grading physical education

Table 1 presents the responses of the 68 classroom teachers regarding their preferred methods of grading PE. The majority of teachers (61.8%) favored verbal grading using descriptors such as »very successful«, »successful« and »less successful« indicating a preference for a more flexible, less stigmatizing scale that avoids traditional numerical ratings. This finding are supported by thematic analysis which revealed that teachers perceived these verbal descriptors as more encouraging and accessible, potentially reducing stress and minimizing direct comparisons among students.

Looking at descriptive grading, we can observe (Table 1) that was chosen by 20.6% of teachers. In addition, thematic analysis showed that while descriptive assessments require more time and effort from teachers, they can offer students and parents clearer insights into specific strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. However, some teachers noted that the complexity and detail of descriptive assessments are not always fully understood or appreciated by parents and students.

Finally, 17.6% of teachers favored numerical grading (1–5). Although quantitative results showed fewer teachers supporting this traditional method, the qualitative data revealed that those who did found it easier to implement, more familiar to students and parents, and more readily comparable. Yet, many of the respondents opposing numerical grades felt that such evaluations oversimplify complex skill sets, potentially demotivating students who struggle with certain physical abilities.

Table 1. Classroom teachers' preferred methods of grading PE.

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Numerical grading (1–5)	12	17,6 %
Verbal grading: very successful, successful, less successful	42	61,8 %
Descriptive grading	14	20,6 %
Total	68	100,0 %

Comparison with previous studies

To assess changes over time in teachers' preferences, we compared our results with data from previous studies (Table 2). It is important to note that the only available research on this topic consists of diploma and master's theses. These are not peer-reviewed studies, but rather academic projects carried out by students. Despite their limitations, they serve as the best available source of information for tracking trends in this area.

Table 2. Summary of previous research on preferred grading methods (2011–2013).

Author	N	Verbal Grading	Descriptive Grading	Numerical Grading	Without Grading
Svoljšak, 2011	104	28.0%	53.0%	9.0%	10.0%
Zorc, 2011	138	24.4%	56.4%	8.1%	11.1%
Brvar, 2011	136	11.9%	60.0%	7.4%	20.7%
Kosmač, 2011	153	19.9%	60.9%	7.3%	11.9%
Pezdirc, 2012	49	24.5%	28.8%	12.2%	24.5%
Bojić, 2012	119	28.0%	54.0%	14.0%	4.0%
Mulej, 2013	53	15.0%	59.0%	17.0%	9.0%

In the previous studies, descriptive assessment was consistently the most preferred method, with percentages ranging from 28.8% to 60.9%. Verbal assessment was the next most favored method, while numerical assessment was less commonly preferred, ranging from 7.3% to 17.0%. The option of no assessment of PE was selected by 4.0% to 24.5% of teachers in previous studies. In our current study, the option of no assessment of PE was not provided.

Comparing the results from current study with those from previous studies, there appears to be a shift in teachers' preferences. While descriptive assessment was previously the most preferred method, in the current study, verbal assessment has become the predominant choice among classroom teachers.

To further understand the reasons behind the teachers' preferences for or against each assessment method, we analyzed the qualitative responses provided by the teachers. The main reasons for or against numerical assessment are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Reasons for and against numerical grading.

Previous Studies (2011–2013)	Current Study
Reasons for	
Motivation for students (19.2%)	Students take the subject more seriously (36.4%)
Provides good feedback to students and parents (16.6%)	Easier to set assessment criteria (36.4%)
Subject is equivalent to other subjects (8.5%)	Subject is equivalent to other subjects (27.2%)
Students take the subject more seriously (4.8%)	
Reasons against	
Grading is stressful for students (58.3%)	Grades depend on students' innate abilities (35.7%)
Assessment criteria are unclear (16.3%)	Grading is stressful for students (23.2%)
Not suitable for educational subjects (6.8%)	Assessment criteria are unclear (19.6%)
	It is an educational subject (14.3%)

From table 3 we can observe that teachers who favored numerical grading indicated that it encourages students to take the subject more seriously (36.4%) and makes it easier to establish assessment criteria (36.4%). Additionally, they believe that numerical assessment places PE on an equal footing with other school subjects (27.2%). These reasons align with some of the motivations reported in previous studies, though the emphasis on setting assessment criteria is more prominent in the current findings. Teachers who opposed numerical assessment in this study expressed concern that grades may be highly dependent on students' innate abilities (35.7%), which may make assessment unfair.

Regarding descriptive assessment, the reasons for and against are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Reasons for and against descriptive assessment.

Previous Studies (2011–2013)	Current Study
Reasons for	
Provides precise feedback on student progress (52.0%)	It is more individualized (73.7%)
Most suitable for younger students (30.1%)	Suitable for educational subjects (15.8%)
It is individualized (12.8%)	Not stressful for students (10.5%)
Not stressful for students (5.1%)	
Reasons against	
Unclear to students and parents (41.5%)	Unclear to students and parents (79.1%)
Burdensome for teachers (36.8%)	Burdensome for teachers (20.9%)
Only knowledge can be included, not lack of knowledge (10.4%)	

In the current study, teachers who prefer descriptive assessment highlighted its individualized nature (73.7%), allowing for personalized assessment of each student's progress. They also considered it suitable for educational subjects (15.8%) and noted that it is less stressful for students (10.5%). On the other hand, teachers opposing descriptive assessment in the current study stated that it is unclear or incomprehensible to students and parents (79.1%), a concern that has intensified compared to previous studies. They also mention that it imposes a significant burden on teachers (20.9%) due to the time and effort required to prepare detailed descriptions. The issue of clarity seems to be a growing concern among teachers regarding descriptive assessment.

For verbal assessment, the reasons for and against are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Reasons for and against verbal assessment.

Previous Studies (2011–2013)	Current Study
Reasons for	
Reduces stress for students (28.4%)	Educational subjects should be graded differently (23.8%)
Suitable for less skilled students; assesses effort over talent (23.5%)	Allows assessment of elements beyond knowledge (26.2%)
Increases student motivation (8.7%)	Fairer and less stressful (19.0%)
Method is easier for teachers (14.8%)	More understandable to students and parents (21.4%)
Fair and understandable for younger students (14.8%)	
Suitable for educational subjects (7.6%)	
Reasons against	
Limited range of three-level scale (55.5%)	Too general; says nothing (56.7%)
Does not sufficiently indicate student's knowledge (16.4%)	Undermines subject equivalence (23.3%)
Does not provide feedback (6.1%)	Considered outdated (13.3%)
Obsolete method of grading (4.2%)	Students might be less motivated (6.7%)
Unclear criteria (7.7%)	
Undermines subject equivalence (10.1%)	

From Table 5 we can observe that teachers favoring verbal assessment believe that educational subjects should be assessed differently (23.8%), allowing for the assessment of elements beyond mere knowledge, such as effort and participation (26.2%). They also consider verbal grading to be fairer and less stressful for students (19.0%), and more understandable to both students and parents (21.4%). Teachers opposing verbal grading in the current study argue that it is too general and does not provide meaningful information about student performance (56.7%). They also believe that it undermines the equivalence of PE with other subjects (23.3%) and consider it an outdated method of assessment (13.3%). Some teachers express concern that students might be less motivated if assessed verbally (6.7%). These concerns mirror those from previous studies, with the generality of verbal grading being the predominant issue.

DISCUSSION

According to the study's findings, teachers' preferences for evaluating PE (PE) have changed significantly over the past ten years. Although earlier studies (Bojić, 2012; Brvar, 2011; Kosmač, 2011; Mulej, 2013; Pezdirc, 2012; Svoljšak, 2011; Zorc, 2011) consistently demonstrated descriptive assessment as the most popular option, our current findings show that verbal assessment has become the most popular approach even though it hasn't been used officially since the nine-year primary school system was implemented. This change indicates that classroom teachers are beginning to believe that PE should be assessed differently than traditional numerical grading because it is an »educational« subject rather than a purely »academic« one.

These findings align partially with those of Vogrinc et al. (2011), who noted that many classroom teachers expressed a preference for verbal assessment in PE and art education. Similarly, Žveglič Mihelič (2017) found that nearly 40% of classroom teachers favored verbal assessment for PE, signaling that the reconsideration of assessment methods has been evolving over several years. The reported reasons for preferring verbal assessment in our study (e.g., reduced stress, fairness, enhanced communication, and better alignment with the developmental nature of PE) further reinforce the view that this subject may benefit from alternative assessment strategies that differ from more academically oriented subjects.

Moreover, in present study teachers often cited PE as fundamentally different because of its focus on motor and physical skills, which they frequently believed to be dependent on natural abilities rather than just knowledge or effort. However, the established assessment guidelines (Pravilnik o preverjanju in ocenjevanju znanja ter napredovanju učencev v osnovni šoli, 2013) state that evaluations must be based on quantifiable knowledge and skill acquisition rather than non-cognitive factors. This idea is in contrast to these guidelines. Since Kristan (1992) cautioned that non-numerical assessments could result in PE being undervalued if not implemented with clear, professional standards, the persistence of this misconception suggests the need for additional professional development to ensure that teachers comprehend and apply assessment criteria appropriately.

The reintroduction or increased use of verbal assessment raises several considerations. On the one hand, some teachers argue that PE should receive a distinct form of assessment to reflect its unique educational goals; on the other hand, there is a risk that diverging assessment methods could diminish the subject’s perceived importance among students, parents, and even teachers

themselves. Kristan (1992) also cautioned that verbal assessment might reduce the subject's perceived credibility, potentially lowering the status of PE compared to other subjects in the curriculum.

The findings of present study highlight that teachers who continue to favor numerical assessment often do so because they believe it elevates PE's status by aligning it with other subjects, thereby encouraging students to take it more seriously. Yet, in this study, a substantial proportion of teachers opposed numerical assessment due to concerns that it can oversimplify complex skill sets and depend too heavily on individual abilities. Similarly, descriptive assessment, which was once the leading choice, it now appears less favored due to increased concerns about its comprehensibility among parents and students. Although descriptive assessments can theoretically offer the richest information, teachers seem uncertain about how to convey this information clearly and effectively, raising questions about their preparedness and training for implementing such assessments.

Teachers' arguments for and against each assessment method essentially point to a larger problem: a lack of knowledge about the theoretical foundations of PE assessment as well as the subject's primary educational goal. Limited opportunities for professional development and the use of antiquated ideas about what makes for proper assessment practices in PE may contribute to this knowledge gap. Assessment procedures have not changed much since the nine-year primary school system was implemented, indicating a lost chance to match instructional strategies with developments in assessment theory and policy.

To address these challenges, teacher education development should emphasize the pedagogical rationale, design, and interpretation of assessments specifically tailored to PE. With more targeted training and support provided by faculties, professional associations, and educational advisory services, teachers may gain the confidence and competence to select and implement the most suitable assessment methods. Ultimately, fostering a more informed and consistent assessment practice could enhance the quality of PE instruction, support student learning and development, and ensure that assessment methods align more closely with educational standards and objectives.

CONCLUSION

The survey showed that classroom teachers would prefer to use verbal assessment to evaluate PE, although this type of assessment has not been used in Slovenia since the introduction of the nine-year primary school. The responses show a large gap between the legally prescribed ways of assessing PE and teachers' opinions on the most appropriate way of assessment. Views on the assessment of PE have changed over the last ten years, with teachers' views on the most appropriate way to assess PE between 2011 and 2013 being more in line with the types of assessment prescribed in the Rules for the assessment and grading of knowledge and the progression of pupils in primary school (2013). The change in classroom teachers' views on the most appropriate type of assessment for PE is worrying because it shows that they do not know the characteristics of each type of assessment, that they do not know the Rules for the assessment and grading of knowledge and the progression of pupils in primary school and, last but not least, that they do not understand the purpose of PE assessment. This is also reflected in the arguments put forward by classroom teachers for or against the use of each type of assessment (e.g. PE is an educational subject, assessment of innate ability is not fair).

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our study. Firstly, the findings contrast with those of previous research, underscoring the need to replicate the study with a larger and more diverse sample of classroom teachers to enhance generalizability. A notable limitation is the sample size, as only classroom teachers who also instruct PE responded to the assessment preference questions, excluding those who do not teach PE but were part of the national evaluation. Additionally, the survey restricted teachers to selecting between numerical and descriptive grading (both of which are statutory) and verbal grading (which was utilized prior to the introduction of the nine-year primary school system). This limitation prevented the exploration of alternative assessment methods, such as formative assessment, which are increasingly employed in educational settings. Future research should consider a broader range of assessment options and aim to include a more representative sample of teachers to provide a comprehensive understanding of current assessment practices in PE.

In summary, it can be said that classroom teachers need to be further strengthened in assessment in PE. The normative requirements for forming an exercise group up to grade 5 in primary school make not only assessment but also individual work with individuals a major challenge.

It is important to understand that while a classroom teacher has all the necessary competences to successfully lead the educational process in all subjects, this does not mean that he or she feels sufficiently competent to deliver high quality lessons in every subject.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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