CURRICULUM AS A FACTOR IN STUDENT OVERLOAD

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Abstract

The curriculum is one of the factors for overloading students in primary schools. The rapid development of curricula in primary schools is the focus of the main factors that contribute to increased overloading of students in primary schools. By analyzing the factors that burden students in modern schools, many elements can be listed, but still what contributes most to student overload are: the volume and difficulty of teaching material, poor quality textbooks, the inadequacy of subjects with the age of students, inadequate organization of work in schools, assessment criteria, additional classes, other activities in the school, inadequate class schedules and ethical stereotypes and prejudices. Looking at the process of developing curricula and the inclusion of new specific subjects in them, this is not surprising. The research was attended by 405 students, 405 parents and 135 teachers from nine primary schools in the Republic of North Macedonia. Surveys, document analysis, and structured interviews were used to explore attitudes toward school responsibilities and teaching. The results presented indicate broad agreement on the role of curricula and teacher creativity, as well as differences between groups in assessments of teaching and long lectures. The findings highlight the need to align content, learning time, and teaching practices with the age and abilities of students.

Keywords:curriculum; student overload; primary education; curricula; teachers; school responsibilities.

1 Introduction

Before we start talking about curriculum as a factor that leads to student overload, we will give a brief overview of what curriculum is. Namely, there is no single answer to this question, and precisely for this reason we want to state which conceptual definition of curriculum we accept in our paper and why we accept that particular definition.

Numerous discussions have been held, a large number of papers have been written on the philosophy of the curriculum, the methodology of its development and its structure. Therefore, we encounter a large number of definitions of the curriculum, which very often have opposing starting points and goals and which consider that: the curriculum is a teaching plan and program; the curriculum consists of learning objectives, teaching content, procedures and teaching style of teachers; the curriculum is a consistent system of optimal preparation, implementation and evaluation of teaching; the curriculum is an overall process of organized education, learning and teaching; the curriculum is a complete development of learning goals and tasks, methods of work and control of results; the curriculum is the determination of the goal, content, methods, means, organization and control; The curriculum is an educational cycle that starts from social needs, planning their organization and implementation, training teachers and measuring social results; the curriculum is a precise system of planned upbringing and education; the curriculum is a didactic-methodical conception of learning, teaching, upbringing and education in an institutional context; the curriculum is a planned interaction of the student with the teaching content, the teacher and the media in the process of achieving educational goals; the curriculum is a plan for achieving optimal learning; the curriculum is a social-pedagogical learning process in the educational institution; the curriculum is a technical plan for achieving the anticipated, programmed and measurable results of achieving the set goals, etc. (Marsh, 1994; Flechsig, Haller, 1973; Hacker, 1979; Hameyer, 1983; Jackson, 1992; Lenzen, 1998; Mijatović, Previšić, Žužul, 2000; Pastović, 1999; Poljak, 1984; Bognar, Matijević, 2002.) (Cited in: Previšić, 2002.) 2007)

Considering all these different definitions of what a curriculum is, Rifkin concludes that the European and American variants of understanding it are reflected in the philosophical tradition of both, that is, it can be said that they are located between European humanism and idealism and typical American pragmatism. (Rifkin, 2006)

In this sense, we can say that there is no single pedagogical understanding of the curriculum. However, considering all the common components of the curriculum, the definition given by Previšić is the most acceptable for us, according to which: "Curriculum is a set of planned and implicit determinants that direct the educational process towards tasks and contents that are consistently derived from the goal and refer to organizational forms and ways of working, procedures for checking success depending on numerous process factors and circumstances." (Previšić, 2007)

Contemporary analyses consider the curriculum through the relationship between objectives and content, teaching procedures, assessment and learning time. OECD (2024a) suggests that flexibility in these areas should be accompanied by clear objectives, professional preparation of teachers and appropriate support for schools. This perspective is important for considering workload, as it raises the question of adapting teaching requirements to the different needs and capabilities of students.

The commission that systematically analyzed the curricula in England and Ireland included initially the older, and then the newer curricula. The Cambridge Primary Review, taking into account the analyses of the commission that systematically analyzed the curricula in England and Ireland, highlighted several points that it considered to be weaknesses of the aforementioned curricula and which were the subject of constant criticism, namely:

No consideration was given to whether the over-extension of school curricula, with numerous goals, objectives and content, leads to the complication of curricula and programs as part of the curriculum; and The over-extension of curricula burdens curricula and programs. (Curriculum Overload in Primary Schools, 2010)

Such an extensive structure of curricula, with goals, tasks, and a large number of subjects, is reflected both on the way teaching is carried out, on the work of teachers, and on students. The imagined and expected results that are set when developing the curriculum in this case cannot achieve their initial goal, because they are not adapted to the real abilities and possibilities of students and lead to their overload, which manifests itself with various negative consequences in terms of their psychological and mental health. In this sense, the need for properly adapted curricula to the abilities and interests of students and their age characteristics is imposed.

Bezinović and Ristić-Dedić point out that curriculum designers can best stimulate students' natural curiosity and motivation for learning by adapting curricula to their abilities and interests, thus strengthening their sense of self-control and self-efficacy in the learning process. The main function of a well-adapted curriculum is the continuous and systematic, theoretically and practically well-thought-out encouragement of students to learn and acquire and develop important competencies in accordance with the set educational goals. Such a curriculum does not burden students, is interesting and has a stimulating effect on student motivation. (Bezinović, Ristić-Dedić, 2004)

The urgency of the problem is also confirmed by the international HBSC report on adolescents aged 11, 13 and 15 years in 44 countries and regions. It notes increased pressure from school obligations compared to 2018, especially among older girls (Badura et al., 2024). These international findings highlight the need to consider burden together with support from teachers, family and peers.

1.1 Curriculum as a factor in student overload

We can define the curriculum as an official document that determines the subjects (compulsory and elective), the number of weekly classes of the subjects and the order of their delivery. The curriculum refers to determining the schedule, and the curriculum to the content. Some authors terminologically equate the curriculum with the curriculum, but this is not correct. The curriculum should be understood only as part of the curriculum, so the term curriculum has a

broader meaning and includes the curriculum and programs for individual subjects. The essential difference between the traditionally understood curriculum and curriculum and the curriculum is that in the curriculum the emphasis is on the content that students must learn, while in the curriculum the emphasis is placed on the goal that needs to be achieved. (Previšić, 2007)

Before we start talking about the curriculum as a factor in student overload, we will analyze the curriculum of the nine-year primary education in our country.

As a more recent example of subject planning, OECD (2025) in its analysis of mathematics curricula emphasizes the need to integrate new competencies without disproportionately expanding the content. In particular, key concepts, deeper understanding and the connection of content within a grade and between successive grades are highlighted. In this sense, the aim of the paper is to examine the views of students, teachers and parents on the contribution of curricula and teaching work to student workload.

2 Materials and methods of the research

The research, which had as its subject the time burden of students in nine-year primary education with school obligations, was conceived as a quantitative-qualitative research. Within the framework of the quantitative research, the time burden of students with school obligations was measured and the attitudes and opinions of students, teachers and parents on the time burden of students in the three cycles of nine-year primary education were examined. The results obtained were compared in order to determine how much time burden students are with school obligations in primary education. For this purpose, we randomly selected 405 students from all three cycles of nine-year primary education, 405 parents and 135 teachers from nine primary schools from the western, central and eastern parts of the Republic of North Macedonia, and through specially designed questionnaires, the students, teachers and parents expressed their attitudes and opinions regarding the time burden of students with school obligations, i.e. obligations in classes, in extracurricular activities and at home. The qualitative research concerned knowledge about working conditions in the school, the work of teachers and the application of innovations in teaching, the working style of teachers, their interest in their work, whether they teach in an interesting or monotonous way, whether what they require from students is a simple reproduction of what they have said or is content in the textbook, whether they require creativity from students, etc.

2.1 Research techniques

In the research, we applied a descriptive method, surveying and recording documentation. For this purpose, we specifically developed: a structured diary in which students will record the time spent in various activities in and outside of school, expressed in hours and minutes; questionnaires that will examine the attitudes and opinions of students, teachers and parents about the workload of students; and a structured interview with teachers from the first cycle of nine-year primary education to examine the time workload of students with school obligations. The statistical processing of the data is quantitative and qualitative, we presented the data in tables and graphs, calculated frequencies and percentages, and also performed a qualitative analysis of the data from the structured interview.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Curricula and workload

In Table 1 we can see the responses to the claim that curricula are the primary factor determining student workload. The distribution is also shown in Chart 1.

Table 1. Curricula are the primary factor determining student workload

Respondents' answers	Students		Teachers		Parents		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
I completely agree.	311	76,79	115	85,19	305	75,31	731	77,35
I partially agree.	89	21,98	18	13,33	90	22,22	197	20,85
I don't agree at all.	5	1,23	2	1,48	10	2,47	17	1,80
TOTAL	**405**	**100**	**135**	**100**	**405**	**100**	**945**	**100**

Note. f = frequency; N = 945. $\chi^2 = 7.38$; df = 4; $p > 0.05$.

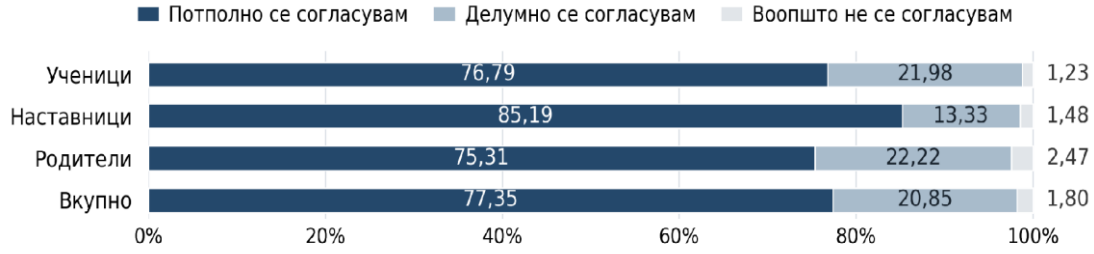


Chart 1. Curricula and student workload. Source: data from Table 1 (%).

The three groups of respondents gave approximately equal answers to the statement that curricula are the main factor determining student workload. Thus, teachers with a percentage of 85.19% chose the statement "I completely agree", students with a percentage of 76.79% completely agreed, and parents with a percentage of 75.31%.

Students with a percentage of 21.98% and parents with a percentage of 22.22% partially agreed with the statement, and the same answer was chosen by 13.33% of teachers. The smallest percentage of respondents chose the statement that they do not agree at all that curricula are the main factor determining the workload of students, namely 1.23% of students, 1.48% of teachers and 2.47% of parents.

In the theoretical consideration of the problem of student workload, we have considered student workload, or rather, overload, as a fundamental factor arising from curricula. The discussion of such a situation does not lead to the conclusion that the modern development of sciences also expands the contents that require space in curricula. However, if on the one hand, the contents that build curricula are expanded, on the other hand, the space in which they should be taught remains the same. In this way, they increase the effort that students put into their adoption. This is an evident phenomenon for teachers, students, and parents. In this way, the convenience of teachers who are now forced to teach new material every hour is lost, and of course for those who should learn it. Thus, the workload of students takes on a dimension of overload, which disrupts their health.

The results obtained in the research suggest that the previously set hypothesis should be accepted, according to which: Curricula are the main factor determining student workload. The calculated chi-square test is 7.38 for a degree of freedom of 4, which shows that there is no statistically significant difference in the answers given by teachers, parents and students regarding this question. Based on this, the hypothesis that: There is a difference in the opinions

of teachers, parents and students on whether curricula are the main factor determining student workload is rejected.

3.2 The work of the teacher

The results of the respondents' responses in Table 2 require analysis and comment on the question of whether the teacher's work determines the workload of the students. The percentage representation is given in Chart 2.

Table 2. Teacher workload determines student workload

Respondents' answers	Students		Teachers		Parents		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
I completely agree.	268	66,17	15	11,11	235	58,02	518	54,81
I partially agree.	133	32,84	85	62,96	135	33,33	353	37,35
I don't agree at all.	4	0,99	35	25,93	35	8,64	74	7,83
TOTAL	**405**	**100**	**135**	**100**	**405**	**100**	**945**	**100**

Note. f = frequency; N = 945. $\chi^2 = 166.01$; df = 4; $p < 0.01$; C = 0.39.

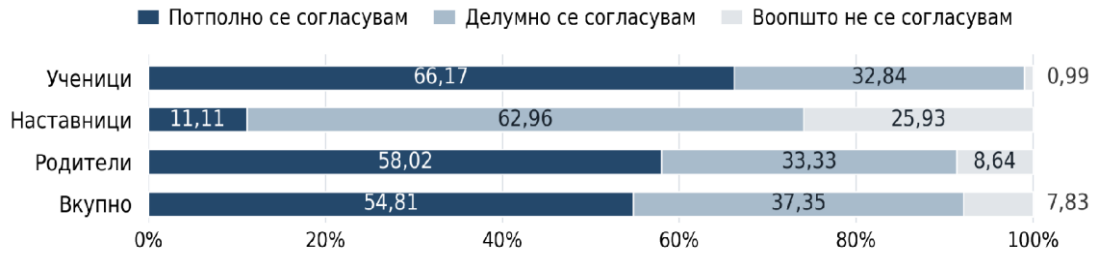


Chart 2. Teacher workload and student workload. Source: data from Table 2 (%).

From Table 2 it can be seen that the majority of students (66.17%) completely agree with the statement that the teacher's work determines the workload of students. 32.84% of students partially agree with this statement, and only 0.99% disagree with the statement at all.
The majority of teachers responded that they partially agreed with the statement that a teacher's work determines the workload of students (62.96%). Only 11.11% completely agreed, and as many as 25.93% of teachers did not agree at all that their work determines the workload of students, which significantly differs from the opinions of students and their parents.
Namely, parents, similar to students, responded in the largest percentage (58.02%) that they completely agree with the statement that the teacher's work determines the workload of students. 33.33% of parents partially agree with this statement, and 8.64% disagree at all.
The analysis of the results shows that more than half of the students and parents completely agree with the stated claim. The theoretical assumptions that we have processed in the theoretical consideration of the problem of our research show the great role of the teacher in increasing or decreasing the workload of students. Modern views place the teacher on a pedestal of a factor on which the success of the educational work in the school depends. The modern teacher is no longer a subject who teaches and asks students to reproduce what has been taught. Today's teacher brings creativity to his work and directs students towards creativity, independence, initiative, etc. Such a teacher reduces the effort that students have to make, and thus reduces their workload.
Based on the results obtained, we can see that the largest percentage of respondents (54.81%) completely agree with the statement that the teacher's work determines the workload of students. 37.35% of all three groups of respondents partially agree with this statement, and only 7.83% do not agree with the above statement at all. The obtained chi-square value of 166.01,

for a degree of freedom of 4, shows that there are statistically significant differences in the respondents' answers regarding this question, at a significance level of 0.01. The contingency coefficient (C = 0.39) shows that there is a medium relationship between the variables, also at a significance level of 0.01.

3.3 Long lectures

In order to more precisely answer the initial question, i.e. to determine whether teacher characteristics contribute to increasing or decreasing student workload, we examined several teacher characteristics. First, we examined the attitudes and opinions of the respondents about those teachers whose main characteristic is that they rely on long lectures in their work. In Table 3, we analyze the attitudes of the respondents on the question of whether a teacher who relies on long lectures in his/her work greatly burdens the students. We posed the corresponding question as a statement to the three groups of respondents.
The distribution of responses is also shown in Chart 3.

Table 3. A teacher who bases his work on long lectures places a great burden on students

Respondents' answers	Students		Teachers		Parents		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
I completely agree.	275	67,90	16	11,85	261	64,44	552	58,41
I partially agree.	120	29,63	31	22,96	119	29,38	270	28,57
I don't agree at all.	10	2,47	88	65,19	25	6,17	123	13,02
TOTAL	**405**	**100**	**135**	**100**	**405**	**100**	**945**	**100**

Note. f = frequency; N = 945. $\chi^2 = 392.07$; df = 4; $p < 0.01$; C = 0.54.

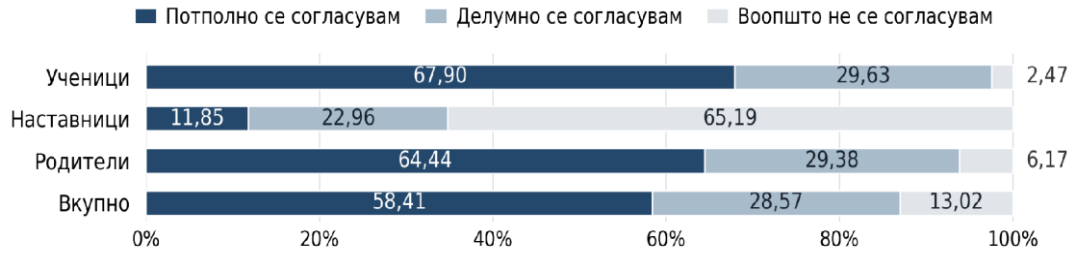


Chart 3. Long lectures and student workload. Source: data from Table 3 (%).

More than half of the students and parents (67.90% and 64.44%) chose the statement "I completely agree." In contrast to the previous ones, this statement was chosen by 11.85% of teachers, of whom 65.19% did not agree at all, and 22.96% partially agreed. Agreement with the statement is also confirmed by 29.63% of students who partially agreed and 29.38% of parents who also partially accepted this statement.
The traditional way of teaching, which relied on long lectures by the teacher, greatly increases the workload of students. They memorize for a long time, and then reproduce it. The modern teacher, by applying modern forms and new means of work, shortens his work, and with it the workload of students. The question we can ask ourselves is: Is and how much does the modern teacher change the style of his work? We can conclude that today such a style is changing, although not so quickly. There are great efforts by interested institutions, which through seminars, workshops, etc. train teachers to accept modern ways of working.
A large percentage of respondents, especially students and parents, fully agree with the statement that a teacher who bases his work on long lectures increases the workload of students. The calculated chi-square test showed a value of 392.07 for a degree of freedom of 4, thus showing that there are statistically significant differences in the responses of the respondents

regarding this question, at a significance level of 0.01. The contingency coefficient (C = 0.54) shows that there is a medium relationship between the variables at a significance level of 0.01.

3.4 Teacher creativity

As the next characteristic of the teacher that influences the reduction or increase of the student workload, we took his creativity. Table 4 reflects the situation obtained with the claim that the creative teacher reduces the student workload with his work. Graph 4 shows the comparative percentage distribution.

Table 4. The creative teacher reduces the workload of students with his work

Respondents' answers	Students		Teachers		Parents		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
I completely agree.	285	70,37	103	76,30	281	69,38	669	70,79
I partially agree.	111	27,41	29	21,48	113	27,90	253	26,77
I don't agree at all.	9	2,22	3	2,22	11	2,72	23	2,43
TOTAL	**405**	**100**	**135**	**100**	**405**	**100**	**945**	**100**

Note. f = frequency; N = 945. $\chi^2 = 2.60$; df = 4; p > 0.05.

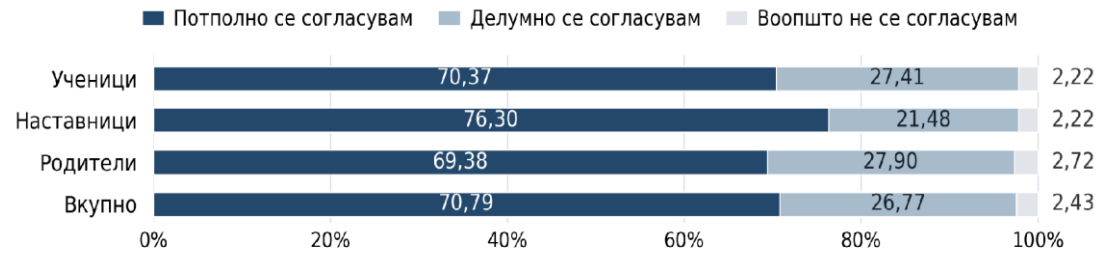


Chart 4. Teacher creativity and workload reduction. Source: data from Table 4 (%).

The largest number of the three groups of respondents completely agreed with this statement. This answer was given by 70.37% of students, 76.30% of teachers and 69.38% of parents. The agreement of the three groups of respondents with the above statement is also increased by the large number of answers "partially agree", namely: 27.41% of students, 21.48% of teachers and 27.90% of parents. 2.22% of students, the same number of teachers (2.22%) and 2.72% of parents did not agree with this statement at all.

The results we obtained support the claim that a creative teacher reduces the workload of students with his work. In modern pedagogical theory and practice, it seems that creativity in educational work takes a central place. A creative teacher is the main factor that is in the function of such teaching. Such a teacher, with his work, reduces the boredom that occurs in teaching among students, reduces the time for children to adopt the given material and reduces their workload. The results we obtained in our research are interesting. Students, teachers and parents agree that efforts in our schools should be directed towards supporting the creativity of the teacher. Among other things, such a trait of his reduces the workload of students.

The chi-square test showed a result of 2.60 for a degree of freedom of 4. This indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in the responses of the three groups of respondents we are examining.

PISA 2022 analyses examine the association between teaching practices and creative thinking among 15-year-old students, including encouragement to propose original solutions and express one's own ideas (OECD, 2024b). This finding adds to the discussion of active student participation; it does not provide direct evidence that creativity reduces workload in our sample.

3.5 Humor and positive emotional atmosphere

The next question we examined, which concerns the characteristics of the teacher, was the question: does a teacher who is cheerful and knows how to bring humor into his work in a certain way reduce the workload of students. The results we obtained can be seen in Table 5. Graph 5 compares the percentages by groups.

Table 5. A teacher who is cheerful and knows how to bring humor into their work reduces student effort.

Respondents' answers	Students		Teachers		Parents		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
I completely agree.	273	67,41	75	55,56	261	64,44	609	64,44
I partially agree.	128	31,60	47	34,81	123	30,37	298	31,53
I don't agree at all.	4	0,99	13	9,63	21	5,19	38	4,02
TOTAL	**405**	**100**	**135**	**100**	**405**	**100**	**945**	**100**

Note. f = frequency; N = 945. $\chi^2 = 24.03$; df = 4; $p < 0.01$; C = 0.16.

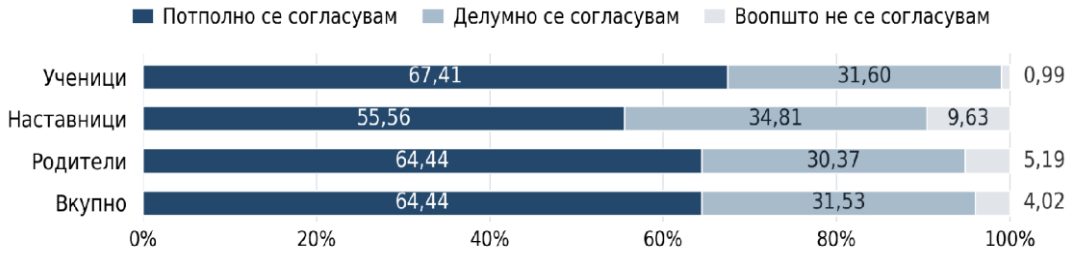


Chart 5. Teacher humor and effort reduction. Source: data from Table 5 (%).

About half of the students, teachers, and parents we surveyed about the claim that a teacher who is cheerful and knows how to bring humor to their work reduces student effort chose the affirmative statement (67.41% students, 55.56% teachers, and 64.44% parents), meaning they completely agree with that claim.31.60% of students, 34.81% of teachers and 30.37% of parents partially agree with this statement. The smallest number of respondents from the three groups chose the statement - "I completely disagree", namely: 0.99% of students, 9.63% of teachers and 5.19% of parents.

In theoretical settings, a teacher who is cheerful and who brings humor to teaching is highly valued. Such a positive emotional atmosphere makes the effort seem smaller and the burden on students to be optimal. In this sense, the results we received from our respondents are also satisfactory. Students prefer a positive teacher. Parents also have such an attitude. Even half of the teachers consider a teacher who is cheerful and full of humor to be desirable.

The value of the calculated Chi-square test is 24.03 for a degree of freedom of 4 and shows a statistically significant difference at a significance level of 0.01. The contingency coefficient with a value of C = 0.16 shows a very weak association between the variables.

Based on all these results, we can conclude that the previously set hypothesis is confirmed, namely: Teacher characteristics contribute to reducing or increasing student workload. Also, according to the results obtained from the chi-square tests, we can conclude that: There is a difference in the opinions of teachers, parents and students regarding whether teacher characteristics contribute to reducing or increasing student workload.

4 Recommendations

Based on the results obtained and the literature reviewed, we highlight the following recommendations for improving teaching practice and curriculum planning.

Alignment of content and learning time. When revising curricula, the essential outcomes should be identified and the time needed to achieve them should be assessed. Unnecessary repetitions should be reduced and connections between subjects and grades should be strengthened, without neglecting basic knowledge and skills. The example of mathematics curricula supports this direction (OECD, 2025).

Coordination of school obligations. Teachers and support services should jointly plan written tests, projects and homework. A coordinated weekly schedule and clear instructions can be implemented as practical measures, and their effects monitored through student diaries of the time spent in learning.

Support for teachers. Professional development should include examples of combining explanation with active tasks, collaboration, independent work and constructive feedback. Teachers should be given time and space to plan together and adapt methods to the needs of students (OECD, 2024a).

Positive and supportive atmosphere. Clear communication, encouraging questions, and respecting individual differences are recommended. Humor should be age-appropriate and not contain ridicule or humiliation. Students should have the opportunity to point out difficulties and excessive pressure in a timely manner.

Monitoring and joint evaluation. Schools should periodically compare the opinions of students, teachers and parents. Issues where differences between groups appear deserve particular attention. Before introducing changes more widely, pilot implementation and assessment of the effects on learning time, well-being and achievement are recommended.

5 Conclusions

The curriculum in modern education is not just a list of subjects and content to be studied, but an overall plan and process for developing the student's personality. Considering this problem, we came to the realization that the scope and content of the teaching content in the curricula and programs affect the burden on students with the quantity and weight of the facts and data that students need to adopt in the teaching process.

Furthermore, by analyzing the Curriculum and Program for the Nine-Year Primary Education in the Republic of Macedonia, we determined that the teaching contents face several anomalies, for example: some of them are outdated and do not follow modern scientific knowledge, they are largely oriented towards quantity rather than quality, they are rigid and sometimes resistant to change; the proportion between practical and theoretical teaching is not well established; there is an absence of horizontal and vertical correlation between the teaching contents and plans and they do not follow the European educational standards for creating teaching contents. Namely, the wide range of teaching content, i.e. the scope of the curriculum and program that does not correspond to the number of teaching hours, justifies the concern of the expert and the wider public in our country for the future of the young generation. The program in this form forces teachers to pointlessly race against time, in order to convey to their students everything that appears in the curricula and programs. In the Republic of Macedonia, the teaching content for primary schools consists of the curriculum and program of the so-called explicit program, whereby the significance of the output results of the learning process are neglected.

The empirical results indicate a widely accepted view that curricula determine student workload: 77.35% of the total number of respondents fully agree with this statement. Similar agreement is observed for teacher creativity, which 70.79% of respondents believe reduces

workload. No statistically significant differences between groups were found for these two questions. These findings support the need to align curriculum content with the available time, age and capabilities of students.

At the same time, the differences in the assessments of students, parents and teachers point to the need for a joint review of teaching practice. 66.17% of students and 58.02% of parents fully agree with the statement that the teacher's work determines the workload, compared to 11.11% of teachers. A similar divergence is observed with long lectures. A positive attitude and humor, on the other hand, are recognized as possible facilitating factors, although the distribution of responses differs between groups. Therefore, improving the curriculum should also include its implementation in the classroom.

The findings primarily reflect the views of the respondents and do not in themselves prove a causal relationship between individual teaching practices and workload. Chi-square tests compare distributions of responses; the absence of a statistically significant difference does not imply evidence of complete equality. Since the sample includes nine primary schools, generalizations should be made with caution. Further research could link these estimates to additional measures of learning time, student well-being, and educational achievement.

The practical value of the work lies in the direction of a shared responsibility of curriculum designers, schools, teachers and families. The reduction of overload should be assessed according to whether students are provided with conditions for understanding, application of knowledge and rest. Such a direction requires continuous monitoring of teaching requirements and careful evaluation of any changes in everyday school practice.

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