EVALUATING STUDENTS’ ACHIEVEMENTS

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AS

INDICATORS FOR EDUCATIONAL

POLICY IN SLOVENIA

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Introduction

In the past few decades, there have been major changes in Slovenia. The country’s independence in 1991 yielded reforms in nearly all aspects of social life. Within this, education was one of the earliest areas to receive attention. After the legislation for education reform was adopted in 1996, panels of curriculum experts were mandated to review the existing curricula and prepare proposals for their reforms. This process encompassed all levels of pre-university education, including kindergarten. At the level of compulsory education, the major additions to the curricula included the attainment targets, also called the standards, which were specified for each subject in each grade. The structural reform of the system included an extension of compulsory education from eight to nine years by beginning compulsory education one year earlier. This means that children now enter the reformed school at the age of six instead of seven.

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The introduction of the reforms in the Slovene education system started in the school year 1999/2000. In this year, the first group of 39 voluntary schools (out of 450 elementary schools in Slovenia) admitted grade 1 students in the reformed system with the approval of the Ministry of Education. At the same time pupils in higher grades of these schools and students in other schools studied the non-reformed curriculum. In the following 4 years, additional groups of voluntary schools started to admit students in grade 1 in the reformed system. In the school year 2003/2004 all the remaining schools started teaching grade 1 in the reformed system.

To speed up the staggered process of the implementation of the reforms, in the period from 1999/2000 through 2002/2003 several schools also voluntarily admitted students to grade 7 of the reformed system. These students transferred directly from grade 5 of the non-reformed system to grade 7 of the reformed system. Special intermediate curricula were designed for them to make this transfer possible. In 2003/2004, this transfer also became compulsory for all the remaining schools.

When developing the new system of education, policy makers, educators, and subject experts were faced with the question of which curriculum areas actually needed reforming and, after the reforms had been developed and implemented, what the effects of these reforms were. To address these questions properly, rich sources of information are required, ranging from information on the general structure and effectiveness of the school system, to specific information on the processes actually occurring in schools, and what their outcomes are. Throughout the political debate on the education reforms in Slovenia, comparisons with other countries, and especially with those from the European Union, were emphasized. In addition to the conceptual and theoretical premises for the reform, the White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia (1996) gives comparisons with other European countries on a number of aspects of the education system, such as length and beginning of compulsory education, the number of periods per week and duration, or principles of advancing to a higher grade, as support for the introduction of changes in the school system.

At the time of the development of the new curriculum in Slovenia, international comparative data providing information on the performance of Slovene students as compared to other relevant countries were available from a limited number of assessments. For this reason, it was even more important that additional international comparisons were conducted for the purposes of evaluation of the reform. In addition to several other international studies in this period, Slovenia participated in all three data collections for the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (formerly named the Third International Mathematics and Science Study; 1995, 1999, 2003).

The TIMSS data represent a rich source of information on the Slovene education system. This paper discusses the use of these data for policy making in the context of the Slovene reform and the issues of validity related to the use of these data for the purpose of evaluation of the reform. In particular, it is shown how a thorough understanding of the conceptual design, methodology and implementation of the data collection are of vital importance for making useful interpretations of the results.

The next section presents a short overview of how international assessments can be used for purposes of national monitoring of education and how this applies in the