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**THE RELEVANCE OF NATIONAL EVALUATIONS IN PRIMARY  
EDUCATION**

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**Abstract**

In the instructive-educational process, evaluation has its well-defined role, along with teaching and learning. Through the feedback it provides, it brings relevant information both to the student on the level of his training at a given time, but also to the teacher, in order to ascertain, diagnose and regulate the efficiency of the teaching activities. Thus, at the level of the primary education, all forms of assessment are implemented and the current observation of the way in which students participate in the lessons, in solving tasks, brings a considerable contribution to the shaping of the measurement and appreciation feedback of the entire teaching activity. A form of summative assessment implemented in the primary cycle, starting with the school year 2013-2014, is the National Evaluation (NE), a program for measuring and assessing students' school performance, but also for monitoring the education system at national level, by reference to international standards. The aim of this study is to identify the extent to which teachers appreciate the usefulness of implementing NE in primary education, given the major objectives pursued by education policy makers through the implementation of this assessment program. In this regard, an online questionnaire was applied to primary school teachers, meant to illustrate the meaning that they offer to the NE based on their experience.

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## 1. Introduction

We live in a world characterized by a “liquid modernity”, as Bauman (2005, as cited in Ceobanu et al., 2020, p. 32) would say, in which society is in a crossroads from a “solid” modern stage to a “liquid” postmodern stage. In this new direction of social organization, the structures decompose, not having time to reconfigure as they are transfigured before new ones could be configured. In this circumstance, the human individual lacks coordinates that could guide him in an increasingly uncertain and ambiguous world. In this sense, among the global trends the following can be mentioned: (Guidelines for the design, updating and evaluation of the national curriculum. Document of educational policies, 2019).

globalization, a phenomenon that gives the world a unitary character, having implications in increasing the speed of information transfer, in the transfer of technologies, in the dynamics of the labor force, in the flows of goods and services, etc.;

the astonishing evolution of information technology with an overwhelming impact on the professions of the future;

digitalization with an accentuated influence on the labor market, on the lifestyle, but also on the relations between people;

diversity, as a result of emigration and immigration, requires the increase of languages of instruction, the recognition and capitalization of the cultural identity of each student, social and labor market integration.

In the face of this great global challenge, contemporary education systems must provide a foundation that prepares students to orient themselves to identify their own direction in accordance with their own interests, needs and skills, without neglecting the dimensions of the society in which they develop. Thus, in all educational systems the curriculum goes through a process of updating in accordance with the pace and variety of social, economic and technological transformations.

Therefore, the need for a holistic perspective as a basis for lifelong learning is emphasized, with reverberations on the competencies to be formed through the curriculum, but also on teaching strategies. The direction of the Romanian national curriculum is moving towards a perspective focused on the formation of key competencies, indispensable for a sustainable development and for the adaptation to the cultural models of an ambiguous and surprising future (National Education Law, no. 1/2011, Art. 2 (3), Art. 3 (4), Art. 68 (1)).

Evaluation is an inherent part of the instructional-educational process, along with teaching and learning, so that “educational action is considered unitary and systemic, a real teaching-learning-evaluation activity” (Bocoş & Jucan, 2019, p. 141). Albu (2001) emphasizes that the act of evaluation is not just a phase of the educational process designed to provide relevant information about the level of training that the student demonstrates at a given time by accurately reproducing the expected knowledge, attitudes and behaviors. Evaluation has a well-established role in the learning process, being an integral part of it, mandated to facilitate learning through the information and appreciation it provides to both the student and the teacher. Therefore, the act of evaluation is not limited to identifying the level of student achievement, but also to assess the effectiveness of the whole set of educational strategies and processes that guide learning. In this sense, Albu (2001) defines evaluation as:

An activity of collecting, organizing and interpreting data on the direct effects, visible and/or invisible, of the educator-student relationship in order to cause a continuous growth and, in the end, to make more efficient the functioning of the entire educational system. (p. 14)

Pânișoară and Manolescu (2019) mention that the predominant function in primary education is education. Following an initial evaluation implemented at the beginning of a training program (beginning of a chapter, a semester, a school year, etc.), in parallel with the teaching-learning process, the continuous formative assessment is implemented (performed by oral, written assessments, practical topics, projects, current observation of the way in which students participate in the development of lessons, in the assimilation and application of knowledge, in solving different tasks) that outlines the direct feedback between teacher and student. Due to the systematic and integrated nature of the teaching-learning process, this type of evaluation allows the observation of the evolution of the student's skills, the identification of gaps to be remedied, and the verbal assessments provided by the teacher, along with grades or other symbols that illustrate student performance levels effective self-regulatory learning.

The primary cycle has in view the fulfillment of the desideratum of the training profile determined by the eight areas of key competences mentioned in art. 68 of the National Education Law no.1 / 2011, ensuring by the end of the 4th grade the achievement of an elementary level of performance in the formation of the following competencies: (Curriculum plan for primary education, no.3371 / 12.03.2013, art. 3).

- i. using the means of communication, in Romanian, in the mother tongue and at least one foreign language, in a variety of situations;
- ii. using concepts and methods specific to different fields of knowledge and technological tools, in order to solve problems in school, extracurricular and professional contexts;
- iii. integration, active and responsible participation in social life;
- iv. effective use of tools necessary for lifelong learning;
- v. interiorizing a set of values to guide attitudes and behaviors;
- vi. manifestation creativity and innovative spirit;
- vii. management of personal life and career development.

Under the umbrella of the goal of training the eight key areas of competence, Romania has adopted the decision to implement during compulsory education a series of national evaluations based on the model of international testing in order to diagnose the level of the education system in relation to trends beyond borders, aiming at students' ability to implement what they have learned.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The normative framework that regulates the design, realization and capitalization of the evaluations at the level of the primary cycle in our country is specified by the Law of National Education no. 1/2011:

Art.74 (1) At the end of the preparatory class, the responsible teacher draws up, based on a methodology developed by the Ministry of Education, an evaluation report of physical, socio-emotional,

cognitive, language and communication development, as well as and the development of learning skills and attitudes.

(2) At the end of the 2nd grade, each school, based on a methodology developed by the Ministry of Education, organizes and conducts the evaluation of basic skills: literacy and mathematics. The results of the evaluations and the individualized plans are communicated to the students' parents and constitute documents included in the student's educational portfolio.

(3) At the end of the 4th grade, the Ministry of Education carries out, by sampling, a national evaluation of the fundamental competencies acquired in the primary cycle, following the model of international tests, for the diagnosis of the primary education system.

This new context of curriculum implementation raises a procedural framework that influences all dimensions of the education system, such as teacher training, evaluation of school results, educational management, development of school documents and learning resources, etc.

Starting from these normative landmarks regarding the implementation and valorization of the national evaluations in the primary cycle, Pânișoară and Manolescu (2019) offer a detailed analysis of the entire methodological approach of evaluation specific to each mentioned class:

The addition of the preparatory grade in the Romanian education system aimed at facilitating the child's adaptation to the school environment, thus representing the bridge from kindergarten to the 1st grade. According to Manolescu (2013), the principles underlying the students' evaluation at the end of the preparatory grade are: "equal access and equity for all students; respect for diversity; inclusion and non-discrimination; quality and professionalism; partnership" (p. 22). At the end of the preparatory grade, the teacher prepares an individual evaluation report (IER) based on the methodology developed by the Ministry of Education, detailing the level of development for each area. It does not aim at comparing and ranking students, but at shaping an overall picture of the child's growth and development, allowing the identification of possible gaps and difficulties in learning and, at the same time, the adoption of remedial measures. Therefore, the purpose of the development evaluation report at the end of the preparatory grade is to guide and streamline the educational process in order to adapt the students to the subsequent school requirements.

Regarding the NE at the end of the 2nd grade, its purpose is to draw up individualized learning plans for students, based on the results obtained. From the perspective of the curricular cycles, this stage overlaps with the cycle of fundamental acquisitions whose general objectives are to adapt to the requirements of the school system and the initial literacy (assimilation of the basic elements of the main conventional languages: reading and writing, mathematics). Therefore, it can be considered that the national evaluation implemented at the end of the 2nd grade concludes the process of measuring and assessing students' fundamental acquisitions, triggered by the initial assessment, applied at the beginning of the preparatory grade, and continued by formative and summative assessment during and at end of preparatory and 1st grades.

Thus, the NE for the 2nd grade includes three tests, implemented on different days:

- i. the first test aims at assessing the skills of producing written messages;
- ii. the second test aims at assessing the skills of receiving written messages;
- iii. the third test is aimed at assessing mathematical skills.

The results of the evaluation and the individualized plans are presented to the students' parents and represent documents from the student's educational portfolio.

The NE implemented at the end of the 4th grade aims at "diagnosing the primary education system", being a "national assessment of the fundamental competencies acquired in the primary cycle, following the model of international tests", carried out "by samples".

From the perspective of the curricular cycles, the 4th grade is in the middle of the development cycle, which has as fundamental objective the development of basic skills for further studies. Therefore, the objectives of assessing students' core competencies at the end of primary school are:

- i. evaluation of basic knowledge, skills and abilities in reading, writing and mathematics in order to inform educational policy makers about the level of Romanian education;
- ii. reporting student performance in terms comparable to how it is reported in international assessments for this age (using codes and performance descriptors associated with the codes);
- iii. comparing students' performance with the national average performance;
- iv. obtaining a useful feedback from the system to identify the students' needs in order to design the subsequent school course;
- v. compile a comparable database of the results obtained by different generations in national assessments in order to determine the evolution of school performance due to the introduction of the preparatory grade in primary education.

The National Evaluation for the 4th grade includes two tests, implemented on different days:

- i. a test aimed at assessing the comprehension skills of a text written in Romanian;
- ii. a test aimed at assessing mathematical skills.

Aiming to identify how students' school performance changes over time by investigating the level of basic knowledge and skills needed in adulthood, lifelong learning, the labor market, etc., designing national assessments in the cycle primary is made according to the PISA model. The Program for International Student Assessment is an internationally standardized assessment for students completing the 8th grade, implemented for the first time in our country since 2001. To support the fundamental purpose of this assessment, training begins in primary school in Romania applying the national evaluation of the 2nd and 4th grades for the first time in the school year 2013-2014 (PISA Tests, n.d.). Therefore, considering the three fundamental fields - reading, mathematics and science - the composition of the tests respects the dimensions of the PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) evaluations, emphasizing not the students' knowledge but the cognitive processes through which it is obtained (PIRLS & TIMSS Tests, 2019.).

Thus, in order to assess the level of comprehension of a written text and to use written language forms in various communication situations, PIRLS tests consist of approximately 7-8 multiple-choice items and approximately 4-5 items with a built-in answer, focusing on the processes of reading comprehension, such as: identifying and retrieving explicitly formulated information, formulating simple deductions based on the text, interpreting and incorporating the information, formulating value judgments on the text. There is also the pre-PIRLS variant, which is based on the same vision of reading comprehension, but is designed to measure and appreciate basic reading skills that are prerequisites for reading literacy (PIRLS Evaluation, 2019). Applied in the design and organization of the national

evaluation for the 2nd grade, in pre-PIRLS students read shorter texts, with simpler vocabulary, grammar and syntax, solving work tasks designed to prove their ability: to recognize simple words and expressions, identify information in the text and make simple deductions, to understand the general message of the text. Therefore, the pre-PIRLS assessment can be seen as a cornerstone of the PIRLS assessment, both of which provide a diagnosis of students' strengths and weaknesses, which serves as important information for both later school design and education policy makers and for the optimization of the instructive-educational process (PIRLS Evaluation, 2016).

At the same time, the TIMSS assessment applied at the level of the primary cycle aims at assessing the level of acquiring the knowledge and developing the skills necessary to solve dilemma situations in everyday life. Therefore, the assessment tests, consisting of multiple choice items as well as elaborate answer items, cover the following cognitive areas in mathematics and science, with varying weights: numbers, mathematical operations, elements of geometry, organization and representation of data, units of measurement, life sciences, physics sciences, earth sciences (PIRLS & TIMSS Tests, 2019).

Therefore, in correlation with the areas of key competences that define the training profile of the student at European level, the national evaluation applied in primary education takes into account two of them, namely: communication skills in Romanian and in the mother tongue (in the case of national minorities), basic skills in mathematics, science and technology. These evaluations are based on the national curriculum and are correlated with the national educational standards for the subjects tested. Therefore, with the fundamental aim of monitoring schools and / or the education system by constantly measuring and verifying the implementation of national curricular standards at the end of the primary cycle, these national evaluations result in a technical report on national results developed by the National Curriculum and Assessment in Pre-University Education Centre. This normative document is used by policy makers and curriculum experts in order to optimize the curriculum, but also by schools to compare their results with the national average. Therefore, schools can use this information as a basis for action to improve their own quality. The staging of this approach involves: examining the recommendations outlined in the national report, identifying students' individual learning needs, designing and implementing an action plan based on the findings, meant to support the development of students' functional literacy during the school year (Executive Agency for Education, Audiovisual and Culture, 2009).

### **3. Research Questions**

The research had in view the following hypotheses:

- i. The more rigorous the national monitoring of the education system is, the results obtained at the NE can be a better barometer of school performance to substantiate the maintenance and improvement of its quality.
- ii. If an action plan is designed and implemented in schools to identify students' learning needs in relation to national standards, then the application of national evaluations will support the increase in performance in compulsory education.

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

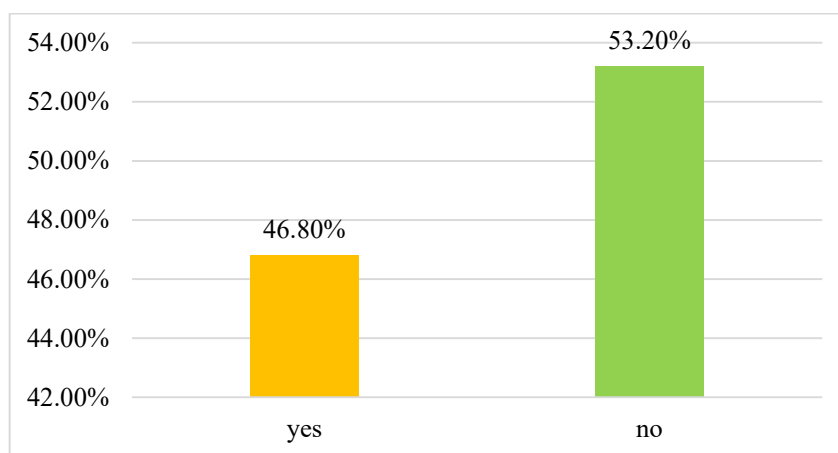
In the present study, the whole concern will be propagated on the educational evaluation carried out at the level of the primary cycle, the focus representing the National Evaluations in the second and fourth grade, seen as pedagogical tests to assess the ability of students to apply what they have learned. The aim of this study is to identify the extent to which teachers appreciate the usefulness of implementing national evaluations in primary education, given the major objectives pursued by education policy makers in implementing this assessment program.

#### 5. Research Methods

The data on the usefulness of implementing NEs in primary education were collected based on the application of an online questionnaire. Composed of 11 pre-coded questions that provided a varied list of answers as complete as possible, it aimed to capture the perspective of teachers on the relevance of implementing a standardized form of assessment in the schooling stage that provides both grounded acquisitions and premises necessary for the training of basic skills for further studies. The research sample consisted of 47 teachers for primary education, of which 55.3% (26) work in urban areas and 44.7% (21) in rural areas. Also, 44.7% (21) of the surveyed teachers have a seniority in education of more than 15 years, 12.8% (6) have a seniority in education between 10-15 years, 17% (8) - between 5-10 years, and 25.5% (12) have been working in this field for less than 5 years.

#### 6. Findings

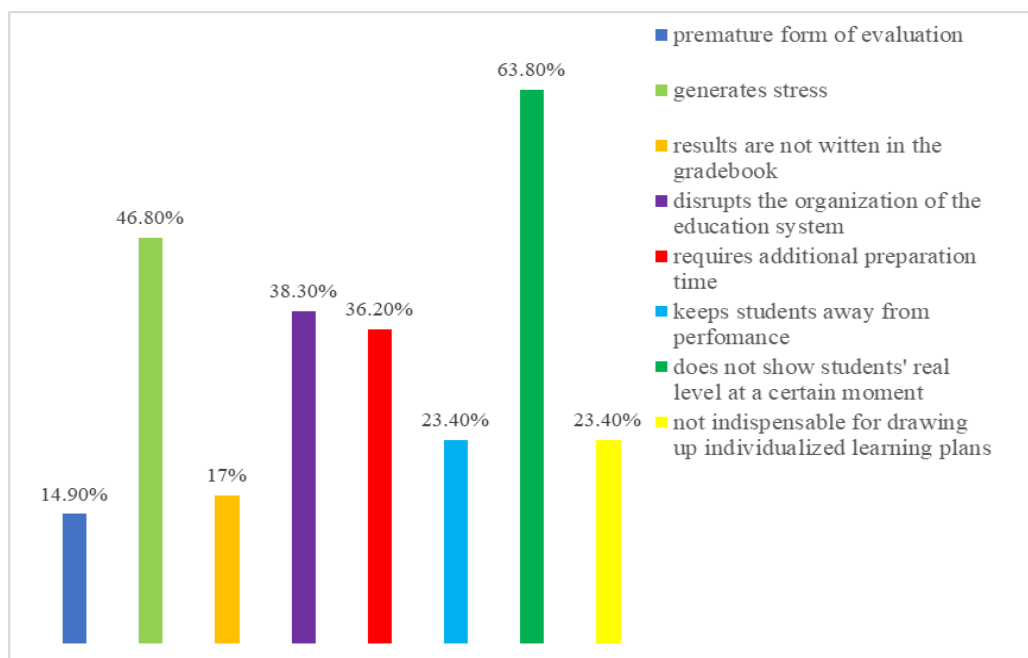
Analysing the data obtained from the implementation of the survey based on the questionnaire, it was found that teachers' opinions on the usefulness of applying National Evaluations in primary school are divided, 46.80% (22) supporting the relevance of these standardized assessment tests and 53.2% (25) challenging their usefulness and relevance as seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The degree of importance given by primary school teachers to NE

Teachers who challenge the importance of applying these forms of assessment to optimize the quality of the education system are those who have been working in this field for at least 10 years, displaying an upset attitude, supported by a series of solid arguments, derived from the practice of classroom activities. Therefore, as seen in Figure 2 below, they state:

- i. it represents a premature form of evaluation - 14.9% (7);
- ii. it generates stress among students and parents - 44.7% (21);
- iii. the results are not included in the gradebook - 17% (8);
- iv. it disrupts the organization of the education system, with a tendency to focus on the subjects included in the EN, to the detriment of the other subjects provided for in the framework plan - 36.2% (17);
- v. it requires the allocation of additional preparation time to accustom students to the structure of the tests and the format of the items - 36.2% (17);
- vi. in certain situations, it delays the activity of preparing students for the development of performance and participation in various school competitions - 23.4% (11);
- vii. the results of this NE do not illustrate the actual level of student acquisition at a certain moment, at this stage the evaluation process involving an accumulation of strategies for measuring and assessing student performance - 63.8% (30);
- viii. teachers draw up individualized learning plans in addition to the results obtained by students following these NEs, constantly adapting them to the level of student development and acquisition - 23.4% (11).



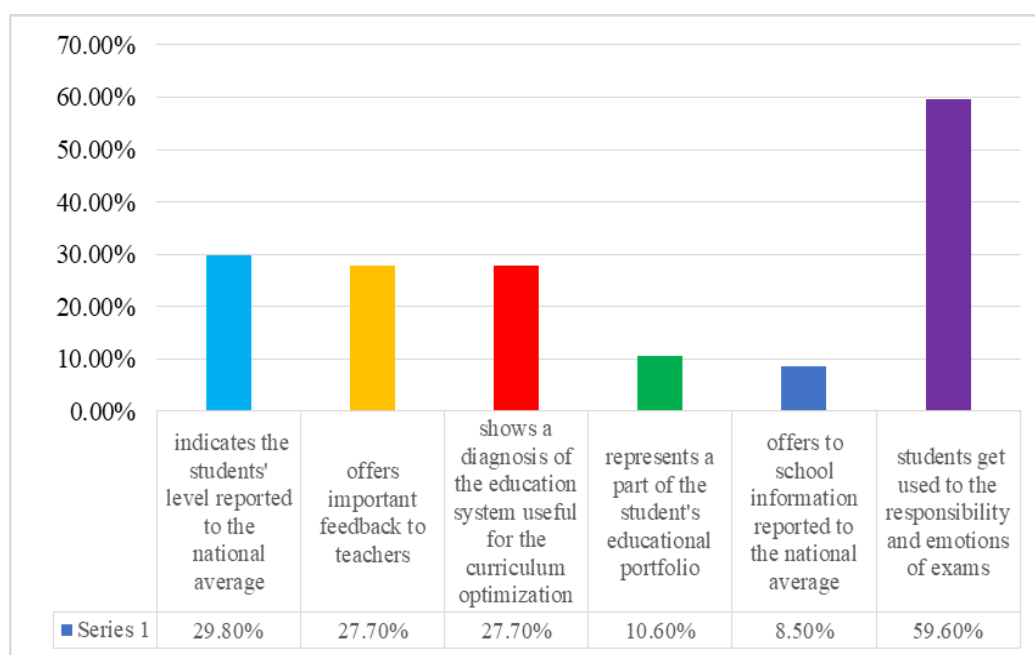
**Figure 2.** Arguments against NE applied in primary education

Teachers who support the importance of NE applied in the primary cycle have less than 10 years of experience in education, which indicates that, amid the low involvement in the entire process of



implementing this type of summative assessment, they are guided by educational policies that express the pursued objectives. Thus, as indicated in Figure 3, they argue the usefulness of NE stating that:

- i. it is a standardized form of assessment that provides relevant information about the student's level of acquisition in relation to the national average, but also to international assessments for this age - 29.8% (14);
- ii. it provides indispensable feedback to teachers for the development of individualized learning plans of students during the subsequent school year - 27.7% (13);
- iii. it presents a diagnosis of the primary education system useful for educational policy makers in order to optimize the curriculum - 27,7% (13);
- iv. the results obtained make up the student's educational portfolio, clearly illustrating his / her school career in relation to the national educational standards - 10,6% (5);
- v. it provides the school with ascertaining information regarding the position occupied in relation to other schools and the level of national performance, regarding the level of preparation of the students from the primary cycle - 8,5% (4);
- vi. it accustoms students to the responsibility and emotions caused by any form of exam - 59,6% (28);

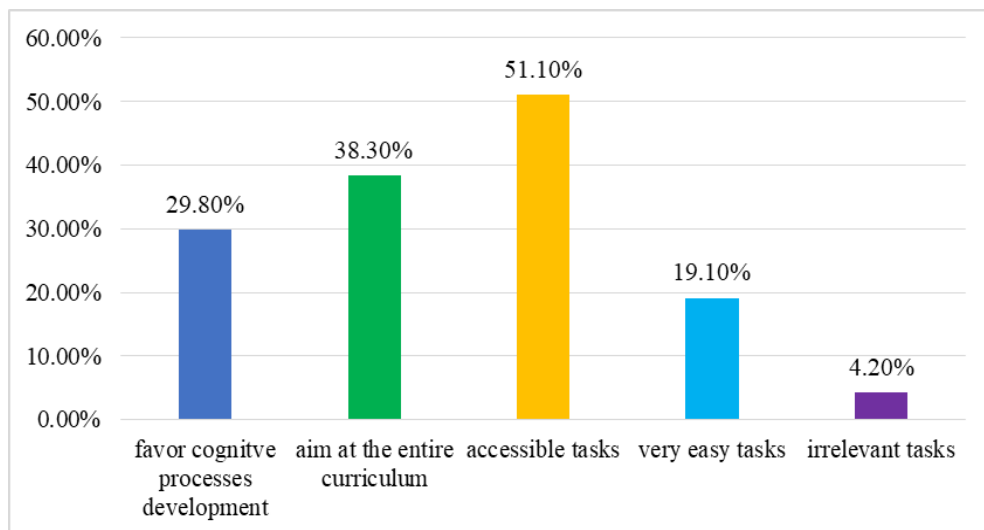


**Figure 3.** Arguments pro NE applied in primary education

At the same time, 42.6% (20) of the surveyed teachers emphasize the relevance of the subjects included in the NE, arguing that they concern the fundamental areas of competence for the primary cycle level. Following a logical syllogism of the above-mentioned results, this category includes teachers who support the importance of this standardized assessment and who have been working in this field for a shorter period of time. At the same time, 57.4% (27) state that the chosen subjects lose sight of many of the key competencies defined by the student's training profile. Beyond this, in terms of the relevance and

level of difficulty of the items provided by NE applied to the primary cycle, as shown in Figure 4, teachers issue the following value judgments:

- i. it places more emphasis on students' ability to put into practice what they have learned than on the acquisition of knowledge, which promotes the development of cognitive processes - 29.8% (14);
- ii. it targets the whole curriculum for a specific level of education, addressing key issues that may reflect the level of skills development for the subject - 38.3% (18);
- iii. the level of difficulty of the items is accessible, stimulating the interest of all students to get involved in solving them, regardless of the school results obtained so far - 51.1% (24);
- iv. the applications given for solving are very easy in relation to the level of difficulty of the tasks that teachers apply in their school activities - 19.1% (9);
- v. irrelevant tasks – 4,2% (2).



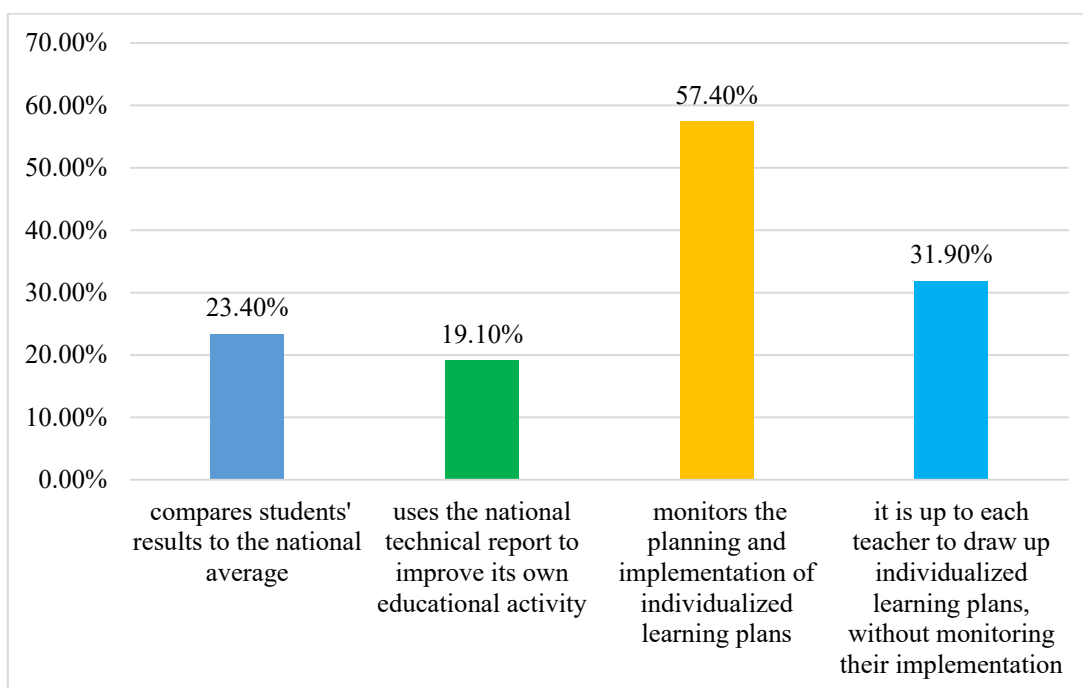
**Figure 4.** Relevance and level of difficulty of items included in the NE

Therefore, beyond the arguments for or against the usefulness of the National Evaluation applied in primary education, teachers' perspectives on the concordance between the finding of students' level of preparation, in relation to national educational standards, and the composition of items based on the model of international testing, calibrate the structure and organization of these standardized tests in: useful tools to assess students' ability to put into practice what they have learned or, on the other hand, time-consuming tools used as screens to disguise the superficiality of the Romanian education system, based on the final objectives majestically stated.

Regarding the concern of educational institutions to support these final objectives formulated in the educational policies, meant to lead to the maintenance and improvement of the quality of the education system, as seen in Figure 5, the surveyed teachers mentioned that the decision makers of the schools:

- i. analyse the results obtained by students in their own school, comparing them with both the national average and the national educational standards - 23.4% (11);

- ii. analyse the technical report on the results obtained at national level, using this ascertaining information as a basis for action to improve their own quality of educational activity - 19.1% (9);
- iii. leave it to each primary school teacher to draw up individualized learning plans to support students in meeting national educational standards, monitoring their planning and implementation - 57.4% (27);
- iv. leave it to each primary school teacher to draw up individualized learning plans to support students in meeting national educational standards, without monitoring their planning and implementation - 31.9% (15).



**Figure 5.** The preoccupation of schools for supporting the aims of the NE

Given the planning, organization and conduct of National Evaluations, being asked what changes they would implement, a little over half of the respondents mentioned that they would eliminate these forms of standardized assessment as they constantly assess their students against standards and draw up individualized learning plans in addition to the results obtained from the application of the NE. At the same time, almost half of the surveyed teachers suggest modifying the evaluation program and implementing it at the end of the school year in order not to disrupt the development of the educational program.

## 7. Conclusions

It can be stated that there is a specific concern at the level of schools that this form of standardized summative assessment raises, in order to identify the students' level of performance expressed in basic knowledge, skills and abilities, but this concern is manifested differently. There are respondents who

mention that the decision-makers of the school are directly concerned with the analysis and comparison of students' results with the national average, the planning and implementation of an action program to optimize the quality of educational activities. Unfortunately, less than a quarter of the teachers surveyed report this issue, the rest mentioning that they themselves are directly responsible for the design and integration of a program to improve educational activities. In this circumstance, the decision-makers of schools only have to monitor their implementation (in just over half of the cases); moreover, one third of the teachers mention that in the schools where they work, the process of optimizing teaching activities to achieve national educational standards belongs entirely to them, without receiving recommendations from the school, based on the conclusions drawn from the national technical report on the performance achieved.

This inconsistent way of internal organization at the level of educational institutions distances the national standardized assessment program from its aims, the measurement and objective assessment of school performance in relation to the national average, as well as the improvement of the quality of the education system. Therefore, the validation of the first hypothesis depends on the level of verification manifested by the educational policy makers in the area of action of each school.

At the same time, regardless of the degree of scrupulousness used by the school in relation to the conclusions and recommendations developed at national level to optimize the curriculum, an essential role in supporting the student's educational path is the way in which each primary school teacher assumes and acts to increase performance.

Therefore, merging all the teachers' answers regarding the usefulness of applying NE in primary education, a little over half of them dispute the relevance of these forms of summative assessment as they consider them time-consuming, stressful and irrelevant both in optimizing students' schooling and in outlining an x-ray of the quality of the education system for this segment of schooling. At the same time, almost half of the teachers surveyed support the relevance of applying the NE in primary school, seeing it as a useful tool for measuring, monitoring and improving the quality of education, but they recommend its application in the last month of the school year to cover and consolidate the whole topics and subjects that are evaluated.

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