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Implementing Quality Management Systems in Preschool Education

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight essential contributions in terms of management development in preschool institutions, the facts that leads to increasing quality of the entire educational process. Approaching this topic and bending with particular interest in the field of formal education in Romania, we dive into the essence of educational management so that we can offer important constructive suggestions for optimizing analysis activities and implicitly increasing performance in terms of specific management of the network of kindergartens. Preschool education is the cornerstone of the formation of human personality, as well as the first gateway to knowledge. To ensure high quality in education, a complex process is needed, very well organized and structured, which must be integrated into the institutional culture of the organization.
Talking about quality management while focusing on quality in education represents in fact an analysis and careful research on management actions aimed directly at increasing the satisfaction of the needs of the beneficiaries of the educational system.

Keywords: *Preschool education, quality management systems, pandemic, technology*

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1. Introduction

Today we have tomorrow's generation in our hands. This paper aims to highlight essential contributions in terms of management development in preschool institutions, the facts that leads to increasing quality of the entire educational process. Approaching this topic and bending with particular interest in the field of formal education in Romania, we dive into the essence of educational management so that we can offer important constructive suggestions for optimizing analysis activities and implicitly increasing performance in terms of specific management of the network of kindergartens.

Understanding the growing interest in early education ensures an adequate and proper development of the child based on culture, values, behaviours and attitudes. By intervening and introducing management systems, novel orientations and perspectives will be ensured which will certainly have the same goal: performance (Zigler et al., 2006).

Nowadays, in the context of the pandemic generated by the SARS COV-19 virus, managers and entrepreneurs have been somewhat put in a position to adapt the way they manage their organizations. Without compromising the quality of the services offered, while also maintaining a strong relation with technology and vigorous regulations, the managers have been the ones who pioneered the tentacles of communication and connection.

According to Sallis (2002), the total quality management system (TQM) has as its defining motto to do things right the first time. For a manager or entrepreneur, this is driven by the impulse to create a unitary team spirit between employees on all the levels of the organization in the view of the significant qualitative improvement of their performance, with the aim of obtaining maximum yield, beneficial for all parties. Entrepreneur represents that iron hand that leads the whole team on the right path and focuses all their interest to the goal of defining means for the organization to function at high levels and implicitly establish a place at the top (Toca & Spuza, 2010).

In general, the community seeks quality more and more whether we are talking about products or services. Early education is no exception to this. In fact, it is one of the departments where people seek perfection the most. In order for the educational system to be quality-oriented (State, 2020), it is necessary that all the elements related to quality assurance be combined into a unitary whole (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009; Neacşu, 2010). When we say elements, we refer to:

criteria, indicators and standards. These parameters must be understood, accepted and used appropriately (Dragomir, 2004).

This research paper intends to contribute to the process of conceptual and methodological unification in the insufficiently explored field of quality of preschool education in a context that has so far had no precedent: the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, this represents the purpose of our research work: implementation of total quality management systems adapted to the conditions imposed by the SARS COV-19 pandemic, when managers and entrepreneurs are put in a position to adapt the way they manage their organization, respecting strict regulations imposed by both WHO and local Public Health Offices (Freeman, 2020).

As options for improvement of management in early education, we propose the following: organizing training courses for teachers so that they are prepared for online teaching, ensuring that all participants in the educational process have the technology required in order to be connected, and last but definitely not least, adapting the curricula to the virtual environment. These suggestions are in line with the theories proposed by Noveanu and Potolea (2008) and Radu et al. (2011).

2. Problem Statement

If the kindergarten (through the staff included in the organizational chart) knows and ensures the quality in all departments of preschool education (basic curriculum, training/teaching strategies, special school programs organized on thematic centres, ensuring social distance, etc.), there will be a relatively autonomous progress (Garbutt, 1996).

If the kindergarten provides an adequate and opportune microclimate for the child's development from a mental, intellectual, social, moral, emotional and physical point of view, as well as rigorous hygienic-sanitary norms, and if the beneficiary families are prepared to be co-opted to influence and evaluate the quality of services, then the proposed objectives will be met satisfactorily, the efficiency of the organization will be maximized, the child will grow harmoniously and will progress to school with a prolific luggage of knowledge, while the manager will be able establish the correct premises regarding the implementation of a total quality system in the preschool institution. This hypothesis is supported by the research made by Barnett (2008), as well as the common view of Dalais et al. (1996). This goes on to show that continuous improvement of the education system has always been of interest and that the optimizing solutions are not at a far reach, having been analysed for a long period of time.

3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

The research follows applicative values of the diagnostic indices. We identify that the curricular elements that must satisfy the requirements of the child's integration from the educational point of view to the new methodology imposed by the adaptation to the virtual environment and we propose personalized plans for each kindergarten in the context of a pandemic and educational offers involving hybrid style teaching. This should involve complex educational projects, based on strategies for observing, knowing and satisfying the needs of children of targeted age, while following efficient guidelines regarding operational procedures for good managerial practices (Pruteanu, 2020).

The Aims of the Research are:

- Evaluating the ways in which kindergartens ensure the quality of educational services.
- Identifying the main factors, both internal and external, that can contribute to and stimulate the educational process.
- Investigating the relations between kindergarten, family environment and community, and ensuring an open dialogue between the family and the kindergarten in such a way that all needs for a harmonious growth of the child are properly met.
- Careful examination of the legislative basis, including decisions, measures, strategies and national programs regarding the preschool education sector (National Education Law no. 1/2011, art. 27 and 28, 63, 64).
- Analysis of the main approaches, dimensions, criteria and organizational indicators viewed from several angles: managerial, pedagogical, sociological and financial.
- Building a guide for the design and implementation of appropriate managerial techniques.

4. Research Methods

Knowing that the scientific value of the data collected by questionnaires is conditioned by the quality of the subjects' answers, and the value of the answers is determined by the quality of the force items to trigger positive reactions, favourable to sincere attitudes, we paid great attention to the questionnaire-based survey.

Our research focused on a number of 8 kindergartens, involving 200 teachers, 200 parents, 50 kindergarten principals, 3 school inspectors and 10

representatives of the local community. We applied the research methods in the specified educational context, following primarily the organization, the function, as well as the quality of the service.

In the category of teachers, 43 do not have pedagogical finalization, 53 have pedagogical finalization, 38 possess the pedagogical second degree, and 66 have the pedagogical first degree.

The interviewed kindergarten principals show a special interest for the continuous training and development of managerial skills at different levels.

During the research, the case study considered 8 kindergartens from a Romanian city (Targoviste), subject to the rigorous norms of the pandemic, both as it worked online and physically.

We applied distinct questionnaires to three categories of subjects: teachers, principals and parents. The questionnaires are constructed by alternating closed and open-ended questions. These can be found in Annex 1.

The questionnaire addressed to the teachers aimed to investigate the way in which they are aware of and ensure the quality of the teaching process, as well as their technological abilities. The one addressed to the kindergarten principals highlights the way in which they implement, appreciate, ensure and monitor the quality of the managing and teaching processes.

Lastly, the questionnaire for the parents aims to unveil their opinions regarding the quality of services provided in the online environment and implicitly whether they meet their requirements.

5. Findings

Centralization and data processing performed with MS Excel allowed the determination of intermediate results as follows:

a) Satisfaction of the activities carried out in the kindergarten (table 1)

Table 1. The degree of satisfaction regarding the activities carried out in the kindergarten

Elements of evaluation	Assessment levels (%)					
	Very high	Picked up	Environment	Low	Very low	No answer
Consistency with the specific requirements	76,5	17,5	6	0	0	0

Provides current and accurate information on new issues	66,5	29	3	1,5	0	0
They lead to good results in the activities designed and carried out	75	19,5	3	2,5	0	0
It capitalizes on the opportunities for training, affirmation, recognition of teacher's merits	61,5	30	6,5	2	0	0
Systematic concern for production and quality assurance	61,5	30,5	5,5	2,5	0	0
Ensures good intra and inter-institutional collaboration	63	29	6	2	0	0
Appreciates children's progress and results correctly	78	18,5	1	2,5	0	0
Provide relevant information in an appropriate manner	76	17,5	2	4,5	0	0
Forming children's personality	15,5	84,5	0	0	0	0

b) The parent-teacher partnership involves a collaborative relationship, in teamwork to establish a common strategy for educating the child. Effective communication with the parent, about the child's behaviour encourages collaboration. It is relevant to know the parent's attitudes towards education, discipline, as well as the expectations they have from kindergarten. Thus, we surprise the parent's satisfaction regarding the quality of their children's behaviour, as Table 2.

It is observed that the parents are largely satisfied with the results that their children have in preparing for school (over 51%). The quality of

the pedagogical act provided by the teachers reaches a high degree of satisfaction of the parents. However, we notice quite a lot non-answer.

Table 2. Elements of the child's evolution that give satisfaction to parents regarding their education

Elements of evaluation	Assessment levels (%)					
	Very high	Picked up	Environment	Low	Very low	No answer
Consistency with the specific requirements	76,5	17,5	6	0	0	0
The stage at which he entered kindergarten	72	13	2,5	1	0	11,5
Other children in the group	56,5	20	5	1	0	17,5
Children of the same age who go to another kindergarten	62	16	2	2	0	18
Increasing personal autonomy	61	17	5	1	0	16
Learning knowledge useful for everyday life	76,5	13,5	2,5	0	0	7,5
Exploring the immediate environment	56	21,5	5,5	1,5	0	15,5
Cooperative skills, help, initiatives	57,5	23	3,5	1,5	0	14,5
Psychological preparation for school	53	22,5	6	2,5	0	16
Growing up	51,5	23	7	3	0	15,5
Emotional self-control-affective in specific situations	57	20,5	5,5	1,5	0	15,5
Understanding socio-moral norms	51	22,5	4	1,5	0	21
Psycho-motor coordination in daily activities	55,5	23	4,5	2	0	15

c) We also managed to discover the definition of the quality of the kindergarten institution from the educators' assessments regarding the quality of a manager. It is observed that educators correctly appreciate the quality of a manager, but in the light of what everyone would like and not in general.

Teachers' perception of the quality of the institution and the degree of satisfaction professional:

- Assessment of the quality level of the kindergarten (12)
- Strengths of the institution (13)
- Weaknesses of the institution (14)
- Solutions to raise the prestige of the unit (15)
- Job satisfaction in class (16)

The final results of the surveys unveiled diverse findings as follows:

I. there are projects, programs and partnerships at a local level that ensure a developed conceptual environment related to a quality education;
II. teachers are not sufficiently prepared for the transition to the virtual teaching system;
III. the technology that is at hand at the moment clearly requires to be improved;
IV. it was observed that there are some concerns regarding the inter-learning processes and the dissemination of successful practices with visible effects on the sphere of quality of counselling activities;
V. parents are not fully satisfied with the quality of the educational process carried out in the online environment, either due to an uncertain connection to overloaded internet networks, or due to the time spent by the child in front of the computer, thus impeding the parent's professional cycle, or related to the dissatisfaction regarding the visual impact of the time spent in front of the computer or tablet on the child.

The changes of rhythm and resources in the system represented a limitation during our research. In addition, sudden changes imposed by new Laws on National Education pose challenges to the implementation of our suggested plans.

Moreover, there tends to be an overall low degree of precision of the total quality management process.

Finally, we met difficulties when collecting answers to the survey. There were two types of issues in this case: refusal to participate and superficial answers to the survey. The results of our research are highly

dependent on this factor and are very sensitive to changes in the answers we collected.

6. Conclusions

The kindergarten institution should assimilate significant and systematic transformations by applying the strategies, values and accountability of those involved in the management of the mentioned institutions (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2006).

According to a paper published by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2005 on quality in education, especially early education, in order to be an efficient entrepreneurial organization, the educational institution must direct its quality policy to respect the following basic principles:

- target on the beneficiaries (child, teacher, parents, organization);
- leadership focused on achieving the set objectives;
- total involvement and capitalization of the entire potential;
- systemic and holistic approach toward the organization;
- decision-making based on relevant data and information, which can be verified;
- mutually beneficial relationships with all parties involved;
- procedural approach to resources and their use;
- adaptation to any situation imposed by the continuous improvement of processes, products and requirements (Călugărescu & Preda, 2018)

By following the guideline above and becoming an open system, in a permanent connection with innovation, the kindergarten system has high chances of reaching its maximum potential when it comes to the preparation of children for success, even in challenging environments, such as the current context of a global pandemic.

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Annex 1.

Survey Structure

I. Survey for Kindergarten Principals

1. Do you consider yourself to be a good organizer?
2. Do you think you are open minded when it comes to innovation?
3. Do you consider yourself to be knowledgeable and understanding of current educational issues?
4. Are you fair in your decisions?
5. Are you a good communicator with the representatives of the authority?
6. Do you manage human resources efficiently?
7. Do you have a logistical spirit?
8. Are you able to solve problems in a timely manner?
9. Was the pandemic a difficult situation to manage?
10. Are you able to identify the problems created by the pandemic and find effective solutions?
11. Has your professional activity been carried out in normal or at least satisfactory parameters during the pandemic?

II. Survey for Parents

1. Do you think that the pandemic has influenced females more than males (generally mothers)?
2. Did you have proper access to technology - phone, tablet, laptop with appropriate connection to internet?
3. Was the online platform user guide useful and efficient?
4. Do you think that your child spends too much time in front of screens?
5. Do you consider that online teaching activities allow the flexibility of time and work schedule for children and parents?
6. How do you rate the quality of online services received by your children?
7. If your child feels sad, would he or she have the opportunity to seek psycho-pedagogical counseling?
8. Has the fact that you had to spend time with your child during the online teaching process affected you and your lifestyle?

9. Do you want the possibility of online teaching to continue to exist after returning physically to kindergarten is allowed again?
10. Please leave us suggestions for increasing the quality of the educational process conducted online.

III. Survey for Teachers

A. Questions to which one of the following answers must be chosen:

- To a very small extent (almost not at all)
- To a small extent
- To some extent
- To a large extent
- To a very large extent (almost always)

1. Appreciate the extent to which you have adapted to the conditions imposed by the pandemic.

2. Appreciate the extent to which the statements below regarding the organization of online learning during this period suit you.

i. It supports students in maintaining a good learning rhythm.

ii. It offers comfort for both students and teachers.

iii. It offers the opportunity for personal and professional development through the use of digital technology.

iv. Online learning activities create an impersonal educational climate, as opposed to classroom learning.

v. The costs of teaching materials are lower.

3. To what extent did the activities you carried out during this period helped you feel better?

i. It is easy for me to undertake online learning activities.

ii. I appreciate that I am prepared to use digital technology for online teaching activities.

iii. It is comfortable for me to interact with students online.

iv. I appreciate that I managed keep the online activities interesting.

v. I enjoy interacting with students in online learning activities.

vi. I am satisfied with the way online learning activities are carried out.

vii. I look forward to interacting face-to-face with students.

4. During this period, to what extent have you considered the following issues:
i. I like this period, I have more time for myself.
ii. Exclusively online schooling is just a temporary solution.
iii. I want a vacation, but not just to spend it at home.
iv. I miss the face-to-face meetings with friends and colleagues.
v. It is difficult for me to deal with work and family tasks during this time.
vi. It is difficult for me to work with students using only digital technology.
vii. I hope that my family and acquaintances will stay healthy.
5. During the period of isolation it is normal to feel different emotions. To what extent did you experience the following emotions?
i. Joy
ii. Relaxation
iii. Patience
iv. Fear
v. Fury
vi. Sadness
vii. Boredom
viii. Concern
ix. Dissatisfaction
6. For the preparation of online learning activities:
i. I inform the students and parents in due time about the schedule of activities for each week.
ii. I plan the teaching activities so that they take shorter time than the face-to-face ones.
iii. Online homework is not more quantitative or difficult compared to the homework normally given in class.
iv. I provide feedback to students for the tasks performed.

B. Open-ended and Multiple-choice Questions
7. What applications do you use for online teaching? Choose from the options below or specify the names if the option "Other" applies.

WhatsApp / Facebook / Messenger / Skype / Phone call / Text Message / Google Classroom / Microsoft Teams / Office 365 / Zoom / Edu24.ro / Adservio / Other

8. What are the difficulties you face in carrying out online teaching activities?

9. Do you consider that once returning to school in person would be possible, the option of online teaching could still be useful in certain situations?

10. Gender

11. Age

12. Teaching Degree

13. The environment in which the school you work at is located:

Urban / Rural