

PROCESSES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE – KINDERGARTEN

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Abstract:

The success of an educational institute is linked to a careful planning. Attainable and measurable goals have to be set and a strategy to achieve these goals has to be determined. Special attention has to be paid to leadership that will allow all employees to achieve their goals, as well as establish mechanisms for measuring and estimating the functioning of the educational organization through the process of knowledge management and quality assurance. The process of evaluation and self-evaluation are important factors for quality assurance and part of the process for knowledge management. Quality is expressed through performance, leadership quality and cooperation with the environment. Research has shown that kindergartens regularly perform evaluations and self-evaluations for the purposes of quality assurance. All participants are aware that the processes for knowledge management are very important for the successful functioning of the organization.

Keywords: quality, evaluation, self-evaluation, processes for knowledge management, kindergarten

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality is very important in all areas and the field of education is no exception. There has been an increase attention to the quality of the educational institutes (hereafter referred to as EI). Much effort has been put into assuring the quality of education this far and in the last decade has grown it. At the same time methods and mechanisms to achieve and maintain quality are changing (Barle Lakota, 2007, p. 147-148).

In modern society quality of the educational institutions is becoming more and more important. Slovenia has become a part of the wide European area, subjecting them to comparison and competition. Requirements and expectations of all participants in the educational institutions are rising and at the same time the complexity of the work is increasing. Employees in all educational institutions are striving for quality, since it is directly responsible for increasing participant satisfaction in the educational process. In addition it should not be forgotten that quality assurance in an educational organization has many intertwined factors.

1.1. Kindergarten and quality assurance

A kindergarten as a public institute is part of the educational system in the Republic of Slovenia, and its function is regulated by sectorial laws and regulations. Starting points for assessment and quality assurance in EI are stated in the "White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia" (Bela knjiga o vzgoji in izobraževanju v Republiki Sloveniji) (Krek and Metljak, 2011, p. 74). It is a national document which contains the core values of education in the Republic of Slovenia. In the past years there has been more discussion about quality or dimensions of quality in kindergartens. Laws and regulations (Zakon o vrtcih – Zvrt., 2003; Kurikulum za vrtce, 1999; Bela knjiga o vzgoji in izobraževanju, 2011 or in translation: Act on Kindergartens, 2003; Curriculum for Kindergartens, 1999; White Paper on Education, 2011) governing the field of pre-school education deal with questions regarding quality of education. None the less, there is no unified definition of a quality kindergarten. Researchers agree that a quality in kindergarten needs suitable objective conditions and a quality educational process. We have to be aware that a kindergarten that offers a quality service is more trusted by its customers (parents and children), has lower operating costs and a better reputation.

The 'White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia' states that everyone has the right to a quality educational process, which coincides with one of the most important principles of the educational system in Slovenia. Constant assessment, quality assurance, and internal development are key aspects of pre-school education; this is why it is important that EI assess their functioning and are flexible, wholesome and professional, as well as financially supported (Krek and Metljak, 2011, p. 75). As stated by Lepičnik Vodopivec (2006, p. 6), a quality in kindergarten assures an environment that provides suitable conditions for a safe childhood and the development of a child's physical and mental abilities. The introduction in the 'Curriculum for Kindergartens' (Kurikulum za vrtce) (1999, p. 7–9) states that it enables quality pre-school education, which is continually developing and changing for the better.

In EI processes are in place to assess and assure quality and offer assistance to improve quality on all levels within the entire organization.

Article 20 a of the 'Organization and Financing of Education Act' (Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju v vzgoji in izobraževanju) (ZOFVI, 2007, Article 20) states that measures and procedures for assessment and quality assurance in kindergartens and schools at the national level and national evaluation studies are proposed by the 'Council for Quality and Evaluations' (Svet za kakovost in evalvacije).

Processes of quality assurance are vital for the proper functioning of a public institute. The key elements are: strategy for quality assurance (consideration of standards with defined mission and vision), rules of procedure for quality (they show that a public establishment follows and improves quality and efficiency of its function), incorporation of all participants in the quality assessment of functioning (periodical evaluations and self-evaluations), diverse reports (evaluations, self-evaluations, annual reports about functioning of the establishment, financial plans, work plans and advisory services, collecting and analysing data from the entire organization). According to Article 49 of ZOFVI

(Ibid.), the principal of a public institute is responsible for an uninterrupted work flow and for assurance of quality of the public institute.

When discussing assessment and quality assurance in educational organizations the importance of evaluation and self-evaluation cannot be underestimated. Through these processes the management of an educational institution can assure quality functioning and at the same time improvement in quality. Article 49 ZOFVI (Ibid.) states that the principal is responsible for quality assurance and assessment of quality, self-evaluation and preparation of an annual report about functioning of the kindergarten. Quality assurance is an ongoing process, based on regular training and education of employees in an educational organization. A thorough evaluation offers a realistic picture, the basic aim of which is to identify the areas for improvement and put into place the necessary tools to carry through with the improvements. Evaluation in educational organizations is typically directed to decision-making, since the essence of evaluation is to improve educational politics and methods. Systematic assessment and quality assurance are the reasons that evaluation was introduced in educational organizations. Evaluation can help professional employees, since it improves their work and contributes to better quality as a consequence. In a kindergarten it is used to determine the possibilities for improving the quality of work. Correctly performed evaluations reveal the true conditions, which is also another goal.

Educational institutions often perform self-evaluation. Musek Lešnik and Bergant (2001, p. 9) believe that self-evaluation is a comprehensive process of collecting and analysing information. The aim of an evaluation is to determine the current state of the organization while planning for the future. Self-evaluation in education monitors and evaluates the achievement of the objectives in the annual work plan of the kindergarten. This is precisely one of the reasons that self-evaluation is one of the basic activities in the operation of the kindergarten. Self-evaluation provides the organization with information that is both positive and negative. Successful self-evaluations may threaten the exposure of employee weaknesses, conflicts. An important factor to the success of self-evaluation is the general climate within the organization that allows employees their right to success and failure. An organization can use the results of self-evaluation to improve quality and at the same time offer assistance to those employees who need it with their work. All participants in a self-evaluation have to know that the aim is to assess and assure quality in the organization. It must not become an instrument for resolving conflicts and tensions within the organization. With planned and systematic self-evaluation in the kindergarten during the school year, the results will be monitored and at the end of the year further evaluated. These results are presented by the principal at the childcare-worker meeting.

1.2. Knowledge management in kindergarten

It is a common belief that education management is not necessary because management involves goals that are defined by economic categories. On the other hand defenders of management in the field of education believe it is necessary to ensure an optimal use of resources that are invariably limited. From another point of view, management can also be seen as a bridge between the optimal implementation of the curriculum, prioritization, integration of employees in the educational system, working with people, cooperating with parents and the educational environment, realization of the vision and objectives of educational organizations and identifying weaknesses and strengths (Koren, 1999, p. 34). Management is required in the field of education, although it is unique when compared to management of other businesses, but the school system does not attain the economic efficiency, but requires funding. In education the management process contains several features. The state has influence on the implementation of certain functions and provides the framework of competences and performance of the management.

There are a number of definitions of knowledge management. Each author has his/her own view on knowledge management, how the organization achieves its goals, the objectives of knowledge management and what it includes. Any modern organization is aware that the assuring of process management is essential. In the era of globalization changes are happening rapidly and organizations can barely keep up. In order for an organisation to operate, one must control, carefully plan the work, set attainable goals and plan strategies to achieve those goals (Tavčar, 2009, p. 5). At the same time it is necessary to direct the employees towards achieving the set goals, measure and assess performance and at the same time ensure quality. This is necessary for any organization, from the smallest to the largest, profit and non-profit, public and private.

Knowledge management is a process that is designed for detecting and transferring knowledge among employees. It identifies the skills that already exist within the organization, the skills that are lacking, and the means of acquiring new skills that benefit the employees within the organization. At the same time it should not be forgotten that it assists in disseminating, use and transfer of knowledge among employees. In doing so, one can make use of the knowledge management processes, which will be discussed in detail. To achieve the goals it is necessary for the organization to carry out the processes of knowledge management. It is crucial that the organisation analyses and includes all aspects of the knowledge necessary for a successful operation. The integration of knowledge management processes, which are stated below, is important for success (Dermol, 2011, p. 16):

- knowledge discovery,
- acquisition of knowledge,
- transfer of knowledge and
- use of knowledge.

Educational institutions such as the kindergarten are aware that the processes of knowledge management (hereinafter referred to as KM) are very important for the work itself and the existence of the organization. It is important that management recognizes the importance of the creating and transferring new knowledge which affects the quality of work of the professional staff and also the management of educational institutions. The important role of knowledge management is reflected in identifying opportunities, determining the need for knowledge, while simultaneously examining the gap between existing and required knowledge that an organization needs to operate successfully. At the same time we must not forget to care for the input and maintenance of the existing knowledge in the organization. On this basis, the processes of KM are triggered, namely from capture to transfer and storage of knowledge, which leads to the application of this knowledge.

Nowadays organizations require a fast transfer of knowledge. An effective knowledge exchange demands linking management strategies with employees using KM; for example learning from mistakes, reviewing past experiences from projects carried out within the organization, bulletin boards, cross-functional project teams and encouraging curiosity. A successful exchange of knowledge within the organization, that requires both speed and quality, demands creation of cooperative processes among employees.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in a randomly selected kindergarten. In this study, quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. The primary source of data collection was through a standardized questionnaire. It consisted closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions, where the respondents had the opportunity to write their opinion. In the last question, a Likert scale was used. We were also interested in the opinion of the management of the organization; therefore we decided for a qualitative research approach and conducted a structured interview with the kindergarten principal.

The study dealt with professional workers in the organization XY. We distributed 72 copies of the questionnaire. We obtained verbal permission for the research from the principal, who was also interviewed with a view towards determining the opinion of management personnel. Forty-one completed questionnaires were returned, which represents 56.9 % of all persons invited to complete the questionnaire and representing a percentage of the response in the execution of the survey. The survey involved only women, since there were no male respondents. Childcare is still regarded primarily as a female profession, although in recent years more and more men are choosing this as their profession.

Empirical data obtained by the questionnaire were statistically analysed using the SPSS programme.

3. RESULTS

The kindergarten strives to provide quality through the evaluation of the employees' educational work, but the process also includes service users, i.e. parents. In this way the kindergarten strives to retain what is positive while determining what needs to be improved. In this context, the kindergarten management is aware of the importance of quality at all levels, although the principal does not have a

major impact on the structural level of the kindergarten, since this is defined by the regulations. The principal does play an important role in quality assurance because the head of management must have an overview of all that takes place in the kindergarten. A headmaster must provide the conditions for work and direct staff toward a quality educational work. Quality work in kindergarten requires a continuous evaluation of each section of the kindergarten. This enables employees to continuously improve their practices and consequently, improve the quality of the organization.

The employees were asked how they check the quality of their pedagogical activities. A majority of them (54.4 %) verify the quality of their work using internal evaluation and self-evaluation, usually conducted by professionals in the kindergarten; 44.4 % of respondents believe that the quality of pedagogical activities can be assessed by the principal during observational visits to the classrooms. And at least 1.6 % of respondents believe the quality is verified by an external and self-evaluation. We also found that employees are aware that they are responsible for the quality of work and that it is being assessed by the processes of evaluation and self-evaluation, because these two arguments they evaluated with a high average rating of 4.82 and 4.63.

According to the survey on educational organizations quality assurance processes, among which evaluation and self-evaluation were highlighted, are carried out regularly and the processes of knowledge management are practised. The results of the research show that 52.5 % respondents stated that the kindergarten management encourages employees to conduct evaluations and self-evaluations. The headmaster of the kindergarten stated that for the employee's, evaluation is a basis for further planning and implementation of good practices. Employees should be aware that the importance of evaluations is to determine the areas of improvement within the organization. With the help of experts and ongoing evaluation the staff in educational institutions can continually improve the quality of their work. According to the principal, the employees are ready to perform the evaluation or self-evaluation because they are aware that it is of great help in their performance and for raising the quality of their work. In the processes of evaluation in the kindergarten all employees are involved, occasionally also the parents, since the kindergarten management believes that their opinions are very important. In the survey, employees were asked whether they feel sufficiently trained to carry out evaluations or self-evaluations. 70 % of respondents replied that they had been sufficiently trained to carry out both processes, but 30 % of respondents were unable to decide on the answer. Given that in the last five years 32.5 % of respondents had not attended any training on evaluation and self-evaluation it would make sense for the kindergarten to organize training workshops on this topic. The kindergarten has implemented a very good evaluation process that takes place from the outset of curricular reform. Evaluation and self-evaluation enable us to critically evaluate our work and thereby improve our own practices. It is a positively oriented process in which employees can identify their strengths and those areas which must be improved for the future.

According to the research it was concluded that the employees in the organization are aware of the importance of knowledge management processes. The employees see knowledge management as a means of detecting, transferring and utilizing knowledge between employees within the organization and as a possibility of finding new ways to work in order to improve the quality. In their view, knowledge management enables the use of existing knowledge in the organization, while allowing the preservation, transfer and gain of new knowledge. They consider knowledge management as a synonym for a systematic gain, creation, use and storage of knowledge within the organization. Knowledge management is the overall knowledge within the organization and the knowledge of each individual. In this context kindergarten management plays an important role, since in the correspondents' opinion, one of the roles of the management is to enable employees to undertake professional development and to build on existing knowledge. Of these the most important, from the perspective of the employees, were the process of transfer and application of knowledge.

One of the objectives of the survey was to obtain an opinion by the employees of the educational organization that was researched, on the importance of knowledge transfer methods. Respondents rated the importance on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 meant that they saw it as the most important figure and 7 that they saw it as the least important.

In the educational organization the most important knowledge transfer method is work in tandem (AM = 2.58, SD = 1.765), closely followed by teamwork (AM = 2.68, SD = 1.378). According to the employees the least significant knowledge transfer method were informal meetings (MS = 6.13, SD = 1.474) and participation at consultations (AM = 5.82, SD = 1.275). The answers were not a surprise,

since working in tandem and in team are reality the most important methods of knowledge transfer. The kindergarten strongly encourages teamwork, while that kind of an environment brings a higher quality of interpersonal relationships, successful achievement of set objectives and also a deeper professional knowledge.

The employees in the kindergarten are aware of the importance of knowledge, since they are encouraged to implement new knowledge, gained at various training. Many would expect that kindergartens intentionally do not perform knowledge management processes, but the survey showed that the employees are aware of them and also implement them.

4. CONCLUSION

Identifying and ensuring quality of an educational organization is a very complex but also essential process, and is an ongoing process. Quality processes are designed to ensure and maintain quality of a public institute. Besides the fact that quality is ensured by the people who work in public institutions, the principal of a public institute is responsible for ensuring that these processes are actually carried out. The employees in the educational organization are responsible to always work in such a way as to ensure the achievement of the objectives, set by the organization. It depends on a systematic approach that will help achieve the goals set by the organization and all others who are involved. In this context management of the organization plays an important role, since its mission is to organize and provide such conditions that each and every participant in this process can achieve the set goals.

The survey has shown that the employees are aware of the importance of regular evaluation of their teaching skills and their responsibility to quality work.

Furthermore, the survey focused on the processes of evaluation and self-evaluation. These methods are crucial for quality work. On the one hand it allows the employees to identify the strengths, successes and achievements of the organization, and on the other hand it allows the identification of weaknesses and opportunities that are open to the organization and which are helpful in ensuring and optimizing quality. It shall be emphasized that determining the quality is only the means, and the ultimate goal is to ensure quality. The ultimate objective of evaluation and self-evaluation is to encourage all members of the organization to consider how to improve their work and at the same time take responsibility for the quality of the educational organization. For the employees both processes form a base for future planning and implementation of educational work. Both processes must be continuous and ensure quality improvement in weak areas and at the same time expose strengths.

It was expected that the processes of knowledge management in an educational organization such as the kindergarten, are not carried out consciously, but only undertaken through quality assurance processes such as evaluation and self-evaluation. But the survey shows that the respondents agree that in the kindergarten the processes of knowledge management are carried out in the areas of knowledge acquisition, knowledge discovery, and knowledge transfer and knowledge application. The employees placed the most emphasis on two processes, namely transfer and application of knowledge, whereby, in their opinion, also the rest of the knowledge management processes are present. According to the respondents, acquiring knowledge is a lifelong process of gaining information and experiences in different ways, as well as developing skills and competences through lifelong learning. The respondents think of knowledge as an initial capital which can be a base for a better quality of educational work. Knowledge is a base for work in the kindergarten and has influence on the educational work. Knowledge management processes are important for any organization and are closely connected to each other in order to achieve the desired effects.

An organizational culture and management awareness that encourages employees to share knowledge are important for the creation of knowledge. On the basis of the needs identified in the processes of evaluation and self-evaluation, the employees must have an opportunity to attend additional professional education. Due to savings measures in the public sector in recent years the number of training hours have reduced, but this shall not be result in a decline of the quality of public institutes. The employees must be aware of the importance of sharing knowledge and consequently, the effects of sharing, on the quality of educational work.

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