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Importance of Carrying Out Self-Evaluation Research**

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Importance of Carrying Out Self-Evaluation Research**

ABSTRACT

In recent decades numerous countries have directed their attention toward the notion of quality in education. Recent projects start from the assumption that the notion of quality must be developed at the level of the professional autonomy of each school and the individual educator, if we propose for self-evaluation results to be a basis for a further planning of educational work. Self-evaluation is a comprehensive process of planned and systematic data collection in various areas of the educational institution's work. It also analyses and interprets information so as to give an insight into the existing situation in the organization or to obtain feedback about its working quality and efficiency. Using self-evaluation, we can highlight the advantages and disadvantages as well as strong and weak areas of how educational institutions are functioning. The essential aim of self-evaluation is assuring quality and caring for development and progress in educational institutions. The empirical part of our study focused on the analysis of principals', teachers' and school counsellors' views on the importance of carrying out self-evaluation research for a good-quality educational process. The research study was based on the quantitative research paradigm. There were 1530 respondents participating in the study. Primary and secondary schools from all Slovenian regions were included in the study. The sample was representative. Our data was collected with the questionnaire. We drew up six similar questionnaires that were adjusted to each group of respondents. The basic research methods were the descriptive and causal non-experimental methods of pedagogical research. From the results we have concluded that the respondents implement self-evaluation relatively often. The majority of professional workers are aware of the importance of the implementation of self-evaluation for the profession in which they are engaged. Principals show a more positive attitude toward self-evaluation and are more convinced of its usefulness.

Keywords: quality assurance, self-evaluation, school autonomy, research work

Introduction

In the processes of democratization and the strengthening of school autonomy, the increasing part of responsibility for quality assurance of educational work is transferred to educational institutions themselves. Many European and other countries strive to elaborate the best systemic solutions possible for quality assurance in education, intensively encouraging schools and other educational institutions to self-evaluation.

Quality assessment and assurance in the field of Slovene schooling is formally regulated by the Organisation and Financing of Education Act, which determines that schools must assess and ensure quality with the aid of self-evaluation, and must prepare an annual report on self-evaluation. Thus, self-evaluation is becoming an important element in the process of quality assessment and assurance in education. Focusing quality assessment and assurance on self-evaluation, Slovenia has decided to move away from emphasizing quality assessment and assurance as processes of control over the work of educational institutions and educators. Rather than stressing external verification of achievements and the planning procedures intended for their improvement, we are now transferring care for educational quality to institutions and educators themselves.

One of the essential reasons, with which we can justify the need to transfer bigger responsibility and independence to the school, is that by increasing its organizational competence, the school increases also its flexibility, all of which provides quality work, adapted to realistic conditions. We can certainly not say that the endeavour for the quality school »from outside« or »from the top« would not be necessary in the future.

In the total quality assurance, there have to be both levels. Both processes are intermingled and significant since they allow the autonomy development of a particular institution while opening new areas of the quality education development – in the direction of learning school/ society. Quality assurance must be systemically established at the state level with the coordinated operating of different institutions, such as the Ministry of Education, school inspections; public institutions, providing professional assistance for educational institutions, the system of continuing professional education for teachers etc. They represent the institutions and bodies responsible for the general implementation and monitoring domestic and international quality policy. As said above, their task is monitoring or checking. Nevertheless, they are not directly in charge of the total process of changing educational practices, and thus also the quality inside particular educational institutions. The importance of external influences on quality assurance is therefore not in the central regulation, but in assuring professional assistance for educational institutions with self-evaluation and collective reflection, since external content criteria cannot be uniformly prescribed for all schools. The uniformity, especially of external signs, physical or social, prescribing content offers or didactic performance, is contrary to school quality by itself.

The concept of quality assurance in schools, which is based on the assumption that no one can do more for the quality of teachers' work than teachers themselves, has evolved directly proportional to the concept of school autonomy (Medveš, 2002, p. 10). Self-evaluation is not, however, a subjective, arbitrary assessment of work by the individual school or teacher; objective understanding is required. Self-evaluation is conducted according to the procedures of a research process, as a systematic collection and analysis of data about educational work quality, carried out by schools and educational institutions, in order to obtain the highest possible quality level. The basic sense of self-evaluation is that the school and teachers assess their own status by employing various research methods, data collection techniques and instruments that can be standardised or designed for the needs of specific evaluation studies. Self-evaluation is always associated with a tendency to provide the highest quality of school work. There are, however, differing views on what actually constitutes the quality of school work and which approaches are most appropriate to quality assessment and assurance.

Quality in education should be understood in the context of the relevant cultural discourse (Stronach, 1999; Gaber & Kos Kecojevič, 2011). According to Sallis (2002), quality is a dynamic concept which is impossible to define in absolute terms, as it can have a variety of meanings. When defining quality, it is always necessary to have a debate about what it is that makes a school good. Therefore, school quality is mainly reflected in the school's individual image including general as well as specific aims, contents, extracurricular activities, school culture and school climate, school's cooperation with its narrow and wider social environment, etc.

Sallis (1997, 2002) describes three fundamental approaches to quality: (1) Quality Control - QC, (2) Quality Assurance – QA and (3) Total Quality Management – TQM. The approaches are understood as a set of policies, procedures, rules, criteria, devices, mechanisms and instruments for monitoring or verification.

Quality control is the oldest approach to quality. It includes a planned and systematic control over the process course and the result situation as well as the introduction of necessary corrections of activities in order to reach regulatory requirements. Therefore, it refers to the detection and elimination of processes and services that are not up to standards. It is a reactive process, trying to assess the after-the-event situation, to reject the already made mistakes and to introduce corrections, but no regulations for their elimination. Delegated authorities, inspections, normally carry out quality control. They control conditions for the beginning of work, work course, appropriate documentation, workforce qualification etc. Inspections and testing are the most frequent methods of quality control, widely used in education, to determine whether standards have been reached or not.

Quality assurance is the proactive approach, operating before and during the process. It differs from quality control at the point that the main task of quality control is to find and correct faults, whereas the principal task of quality assurance is to prevent the occurrence of faults or their repetition. This

approach is internally accepted by all the staff, who attempt to improve quality. Standards and criteria are set inside the organization. Quality is therefore incorporated into the process, attempting to ensure that the result is achieved according to the predetermined specifications.

Total quality management is a proactive approach, upgrading the approaches of quality assurance. The aim of total quality management is to create quality culture, where the aim of the staff is to meet customers' needs. Total quality management is the approach based on the quality of interpersonal relations. It is directed towards people, building on humans. Sallis (1997, 2002) defines it as the philosophy of continuous improvement, which can be assured by every educational institution by means of particular practical instruments for meeting and exceeding customers' present and future needs, wishes and expectations. It is the essential element of constant effectiveness improvement, i.e. step-by-step improvement. This is the philosophy of perpetual, long-term quality improvement. Constant innovations, improvements and changes are stressed as a cycle of continuous improvement. There is a conscious performance analysis and change planning. Therefore, the purpose of total quality management is a constant concern of every single school for its development as well as for achieving the highest possible quality level.

The processes of assessing and assuring quality are closely related to research work, that is, more specifically, to carrying out self-evaluation research studies. When responsibility for quality assurance has been allocated to each individual school, it is assumed that educators, too, are motivated as well as qualified to carry out self-evaluation. The idea that educators should undertake research work originates in the English project Ford Teaching (1973–1976), which trained educators to self-evaluate educational practice and to conduct action research studies (Stenhouse, 1975). Self-evaluating educational practice was perceived as belonging to the educator's everyday tasks, and the results of self-evaluation were taken as a basis for a further planning of educational work.

Evaluation is a process of establishing to what degree and in what manner we have reached our goals. Through evaluation we collect evidence and reach provable findings on the quality of programs, projects, services, organizations and individuals' work (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). This means a systematic use of social science research methods to assess the plans, implementation, outcomes and efficiency of programs, policies or units of analysis (Rossi & Freeman, 1993, p. 4). Evaluation belongs to applied social science research. As a form of applied research evaluation differs from basic research, which is directed toward further theory development, in that it is focused on changing the existing conditions, its fundamental aim being practical progress. Interim and final conclusions form the basis for the development of the plans for further work, and these plans include the introduction of changes and improvements directly to pedagogical practice.

Self-evaluation can also be defined as a reflection on the important aspects of educational work, leading to the assessment of the current work done by an educational institution, or as a planned, systematic, structured and constant

attention that schools pay to the quality of their work (Medveš, 2002; Vogrinc & Valenčič Zuljan, 2009). Data collected through self-evaluation is the foundation used to plan how to eliminate weaknesses and maintain positive achievements. Thus, they are of key importance for institutional and individual quality improvement and maintenance.

The process of quality development thus represents a constant concern of every individual school for its development and its endeavours for achieving the highest possible level of quality, in all the areas of its implementation

Defining the Purpose and Methodology of the Research Study

The Goals and Purposes of the Research Study

In the present empirical research, the focus was on the conducting of self-evaluation research in Slovenian primary and secondary schools, based on the assumption that, if we want the results of self-evaluation to form the basis for the further planning of educational work, the concept of quality needs to be developed at the level of the professional autonomy of the school and the individual teacher.

The frequency of carrying out self-evaluation research, however, does not depend only on the expertise of conducting self-evaluation research but also on the views or beliefs that educators have about the importance of conducting such research. Therefore, the empirical part of our study focused on the analysis of principals', teachers' and school counsellors' views on the importance of carrying out self-evaluation research for a good-quality educational process. We examined:

- whether there are differences among principals, teachers and counsellors in primary and secondary schools with regard to how often they carry out self-evaluation;
- whether there are differences among primary- and secondary-school principals', teachers' and counsellors' views on the importance of self-evaluation to the profession they practise, and the degree to which their school managements encourage, educators to carry out self-evaluation.

The Basic Research Method

The basic research methods were the descriptive and causal non-experimental methods of pedagogical research. The research study was based on the quantitative research paradigm.

The Sample

The research involved 1,530 respondents. The sample was selected systematically, with primary and secondary schools from various geographical areas of Slovenia being included in the survey. The sample is representative and is further specified.

A total of 1,109 respondents from 107 primary schools responded to the questionnaire on the performance of self-evaluation in primary school. The overall responsiveness of schools was 71.3%.

Table 1. *The Description of the Sample from Primary School*

	N	Gender	Average age (standard deviation)	Average year of work experience (standard deviation)
Primary teachers	913	88.9% female 11.1% male	42.39 years (9.20 years)	18.92 years (10.75 years)
Counsellors	92	96.6% female 3.4% male	46.15 years (9.53 years)	21.96 years (10.33 years)
Principals	104	67.6% female 32.4% male	49.71 years (6.73 years)	26.69 years (7.45 years)

The questionnaire on the performance of self-evaluation in secondary school was completed by 421 respondents. The questionnaires were returned by 33 secondary schools. The response rate was 66.0%.

Table 2. *The Description of the Sample from Secondary School*

	N	Gender	Average age (standard deviation)	Average year of work experience (standard deviation)
Secondary school teachers	360	72.4% female 27.6% male	44.02 years (8.27 years)	19.16 years (8.83 years)
Counsellors	30	100% female	41.77 years (7.65 years)	15.93 years (8.63 years)
Principals	31	51.6% female 48.4% men	49.16 years (6.91 years)	25.87 years (7.58 years)

Data Collection and the Instrument

The data were collected using questionnaires designed for primary and secondary school principals, teachers and counsellors. Six content-related questionnaires were compiled, each tailored to a specific group of respondents (e.g., the statement from the questionnaire for teachers "Teachers must evaluate their work." was changed into "Principals must evaluate their work." in the questionnaire for principals and into "School counsellors must evaluate their

work." in the questionnaire for school counsellors.). The questionnaire was compiled according to the relevant literature from the field of carrying out self-evaluation.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were processed at the levels of descriptive and inferential statistics. We used the frequency distribution (f, f %) of attributive variables, the basic descriptive statistics of numerical variables (arithmetic mean, dispersion), the chi-square test of hypothesis independence, Kullback's χ^2 -test (where the condition for the chi-square test was not satisfied). The percentages given for each individual answer were calculated with regard to the number of the respondents who responded to the question (i.e. valid answers) and not with regard to the number of all the respondents participating in the research study.

Results and Discussion

The educators in our study were asked about how frequently they carried out self-evaluation. To ensure the validity of responses, we started by defining self-evaluation as systematic data collection about a phenomenon with the intention of evaluating it and/or improving it on that basis. The responses revealed statistically significant differences ($\chi^2 = 109.609$, $g = 20$, $\alpha = 0.000$). Of those who replied that they frequently or very frequently carried out self-evaluation the majority were primary-school teachers (81.0%). That was also the response given by three quarters of primary-school principals (70.6%), two thirds of secondary-school counsellors (66.7%), nearly two thirds of secondary-school teachers (64.4%), and a little over a half of primary-school counsellors (55.1%) and secondary-school principals (51.6%). From the aspect of our examined topic, the results are very encouraging, since in all the groups more than a half of respondents replied that they frequently or very frequently carried out self-evaluation.

In our research study we were also interested in how the responding educators assess the importance of self-evaluation to the profession they practise. Some studies (e.g. Van Petegem et al., 2005) show that principals are generally more aware of the importance of self-evaluation than teachers. Overall, teachers are not entirely convinced of the importance of self-evaluation, whereas principals are. Principals show a more positive attitude toward self-evaluation and are more convinced of its usefulness (ibid.). Although there were statistically significant differences among the respondents' in our study ($\chi^2 = 71.935$, $g = 20$, $\alpha = 0.000$), the majority of all of them said they found self-evaluation important or very important to the profession they practise. The largest share of the respondents who expressed that opinion was the share of primary-school principals (89.7%) and secondary-school principals (86.2%), followed by the shares of primary-school counsellors (80.5%) and primary-

school teachers (79.5%). The shares of the secondary-school counsellors (66.7%) and secondary-school teachers (66.4%) who share that opinion are somewhat smaller.

A school's successful self-evaluation depends on mutual support, trust, openness, and cooperation among educators (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Vanhoof, Van Petegem, Verhoeven, & Buvens, 2009). The pedagogical head of a school has an exceptionally important role in developing an adequate atmosphere for assuring quality. Consequently, we asked our respondents about the degree to which their school management encourages educators to carry out self-evaluation.

Table 3. *The Opinion of Respondents about How Much School Management Encourages Pedagogical Workers to Carry Out Self-Evaluation*

		Assess, how much school management encourages educator to carry out self-evaluation					
		absolutely doesn't encourage	doesn't encourage	moderate	encourages	greatly encourages	Total
Primary school teachers	frequency	8	26	193	470	206	903
	percentage	0,9%	2,9%	21,4%	52,0%	22,8%	100,0%
Primary school counsellors	frequency	0	3	18	40	25	86
	percentage	0,0%	3,5%	20,9%	46,5%	29,1%	100,0%
Primary school principals	frequency	1	3	24	55	20	103
	percentage	1,0%	2,9%	23,3%	53,4%	19,4%	100,0%
Secondary school teachers	frequency	7	37	130	161	20	355
	percentage	2,0%	10,4%	36,6%	45,4%	5,6%	100,0%
Secondary school counsellors	frequency	0	2	12	14	2	30
	percentage	0,0%	6,7%	40,0%	46,7%	6,7%	100,0%
Secondary school principals	frequency	0	0	13	14	4	31
	percentage	0,0%	0,0%	41,9%	45,2%	12,9%	100,0%
Total	frequency	16	71	390	754	277	1508
	percentage	1,1%	4,7%	25,9%	50,0%	18,4%	100,0%

It is interesting that the share of educators working in primary schools (approximately three quarters of school counsellors, teachers, and principals) who think that their school's management encourages, or greatly encourages, self-evaluation is bigger than the share of educators working in secondary schools (nearly three fifths of principals and a good half of school counsellors and teachers) who hold that same opinion. Their responses reveal statistically significant differences ($2\hat{I}=126.098$, $g = 20$, $\alpha = 0.000$).

Each educational institution should develop a cooperative atmosphere and reach a consensus on common expectations and values based on the vision and mission of the institution, with which each member of the group can identify. It is crucial for each educator to be aware of his/her responsibility or role in the process of comprehensive quality assurance. Educational institutions should also foster the belief that carrying out self-evaluation is a fundamental factor in assuring the quality of educational work. Motivation for lifelong learning, readiness, and qualification for constant critical self-evaluation, acquisition of new knowledge, and the introduction of new findings to pedagogical practice are important factors in the professional development of each educator (Podgornik & Mažgon, 2015). Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic to expect teachers to become reflective practitioners by themselves. In order to reflect and research their practice and in order to be willing to expose their work to discussions and the criticism of their colleagues or even broader professional public (by reporting and publishing their research findings), teachers must be adequately trained for research and self-evaluation. They should acquire adequate knowledge as early as in the course of their undergraduate study as well as later, in the system of in-service training for teachers. In addition, it would be necessary to develop cooperative climate at school, to obtain consensus about common beliefs and the vision and mission of the school, with which every community member would be able to identify. In that situation, the pedagogical leader of the school, who must intentionally orient teachers into the cooperation and the process of reflection, research and analysis of their practice, plays an important role.

If self-evaluation is to provide us with accurate data which can serve as a basis for further plans, it is vital for self-evaluation research studies to accord with methodological standards. Therefore, it is very important that study programs for future educators approach self-evaluation by combining methodological and content knowledge. Vogrinc et al. (2007, p. 65) write that it is necessary for students to acquire sound research knowledge (at least basic methodological knowledge and statistical procedures used in pedagogy) and gain their first concrete experiences in research work during undergraduate studies. We can expect that the teachers who gain positive experiences and basic competences related to research during their studies will extend and improve the knowledge during their process of continuing in-service training (ibid., p. 58). H. Niemi (2008) believes that teachers must have at least basic knowledge of pedagogical methodology in order to be able to monitor and analyse their own practice. She speaks about the so-called scientific literacy. Without that component, teachers are merely the executors of requirements, which are made outside of their indirect pedagogical practice. They need scientific literacy to understand on what basis they can build their pedagogical work. Without such understanding, they have only few options for the in-depth analysis of the theory from the educational area, as well as of their own pedagogical work.

We feel it is particularly relevant to stress the importance of relating the individual's professional development to the development and quality of the

school as a whole. Educators as professional workers cannot be only implementers of decisions but also partners in decision-making. However, when evaluating decisions, they must assume an active role (Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006). MacBeath (2011, p. 361) states that this implies a paradigm shift from the passive and subordinate role to the active role in which educators are the first agents of self-evaluation, taking on the responsibility for their individual and collective professional development.

Conclusion

The responses revealed that Slovenian pedagogical workers (principals, teachers and school counsellors) frequently conduct self-evaluation. Of those who replied that they frequently or very frequently carried out self-evaluation the majority were primary-school teachers (81.0%) and primary-school principals (70.6%). Although there were statistically significant differences among the respondents' in our study, the majority of all of them said they found self-evaluation important or very important to the profession they practise. However, the share of pedagogical workers working in primary schools (approximately three quarters of school counsellors, teachers, and principals) who think that their school's management encourages, or greatly encourages, self-evaluation is bigger than the share of pedagogical workers working in secondary schools (nearly three fifths of principals and a good half of school counsellors and teachers) who hold that same opinion.

Self-evaluation is a comprehensive process of planned and systematic data collection in various areas of the educational institution's work. It also analyzes and interprets information so as to give an insight into the existing situation in the organization or to obtain feedback about its working quality and efficiency. Using self-evaluation, we can highlight the advantages and disadvantages as well as strong and weak areas of how educational institutions are functioning. The essential aim of self-evaluation is assuring quality and caring for development and progress in educational institutions. Consequently, the conclusions must lead to the preparation of the action plan, which includes the introduction of changes, improvements, innovation, etc. to the areas where this is necessary. We also get confirmation that our work in the areas where self-evaluation results are positive is good and should be continued. Self-evaluation can be carried out at the level of a school or an individual educator. The latter serves as regular information for educators about their work. This means regular quality assessment in the areas that are usually related to the subject(s) and class(es) that the teacher teaches. This is a systematic form of reflection or planned, systematic data collection, analysis and interpretation with the intention of assessing and improving the quality of one's pedagogical work. In this, individuals can collaborate with their colleagues or school management, who can provide them with personal and professional support. Self-evaluation at the level of the school is more comprehensive, and it usually incorporates more areas of quality assessment simultaneously and more different interest groups

(school management, other educators, students, their parents, representatives of other professional institutions). To carry out self-evaluation in a good-quality manner, it is important for a quality working group to be formed in the educational institution to manage the whole project and take the most important decisions. At the start of the process of self-evaluation the key decisions about the priorities and content areas of quality assessment are taken. Afterwards, the quality group prepares the content and methodological plan for the self-evaluation research study and instruments for data collection (either selecting already prepared self-evaluation instruments or developing specific instruments for their specific needs). The basic tasks of the quality group also include data collection, analysis and interpretation and the preparation of the report on research outcomes, as well as planning and organizing discussions in the educational institution. Representatives of all participating groups are part of the discussions where self-evaluation research outcomes are presented and suggestions for further plans are approved.

Self-evaluation can become an important factor of growth and development but an adequate school atmosphere must be created for self-evaluation in schools to be carried out. The essence of the atmosphere which can assure quality lies in the school's striving for the improvement of work as a permanent expert activity.

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