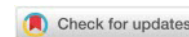


THE QUALITY OF SCHOOL EDUCATION BETWEEN REGULATIONS AND THE PREPARATION OF FUTURE MANAGERS

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Abstract: The article examines the quality of education as one of the major challenges of schools worldwide, as well as a specific problem in Bulgarian public schools. The quality of education in Bulgaria is a national policy priority, strategically and legislatively defined in the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 – 2030) and in the Preschool and School Education Act. The school principal is legally responsible for ensuring, organizing, coordinating, and controlling various factors that influence educational quality. The overall organisation and management of quality in the educational institution is strategic and its monitoring is necessary in order to determine to what extent it is ensured and what still needs to be done in order to claim that the school provides quality education. University programmes in education management include various approaches, including competency-based methods, to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary for planning, organizing, motivating, coordinating, reflecting, and controlling processes to ensure quality education in schools. In the university's management programmes, some of the students already hold the position of “director” and at the same time improve their theoretical and practical knowledge. The study was conducted among the students of the Master's Degree Programme “Educational Management” of Shumen University “Bishop Konstantin Preslavsky” with the aim of examining their competences and attitudes towards the quality of education in terms of definition of the concept, its regulatory framework in pre-school and school education, and the level of university preparation for developing of competences in quality management in kindergartens or schools. The study findings indicate that students possess a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental theoretical principles of quality of education and its management. The study also highlights their readiness to conduct self-assessment within educational institutions and collaborate with regional authorities to provide information on their competencies acquired at the university for assessing and managing the quality of education in schools. Based on these findings, the article concludes with recommendations for the implementation of institutional self-assessment systems.

Keywords: quality of education, quality management of education, assessment, self-assessment

Field: Social sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary sources define the quality of education as a complex phenomenon that includes various dimensions, including the quality of teaching and learning, institutional management, relationships within the school community and with stakeholders, strategic and operational leadership, community building, the physical and psychological environment in the institution, the integration of innovations and innovative practices to enhance and sustain the quality of education. Technological advancements are increasingly shaping quality management, transforming school subjects and university courses into interdisciplinary ones. Education is becoming more application-oriented, with curricula designed to adapt to technological changes and equip students with a comprehensive set of competencies (Serditova, 2020). Digitalisation is a pivotal aspect of development related to globalisation, as discussed by Dojdikov in the context of online learning and its impact on the quality of life and the quality of education of students (Dojdikov, 2020). Another emerging trend is the involvement of various stakeholders in learning, strengthening the connection between secondary and higher education as well as employer organisations to ensure the practical orientation of knowledge. In response, regulatory frameworks are continuously evolving to align with modern educational practices and trends. Andreeva and D. Dimitrova define it as a guarantee for the quality of educational services and the adoption of European standards at the national level (Andreeva & Dimitrova, 2019). They recommend a comprehensive modernisation of the legal framework in higher education, emphasizing coordinated actions of the competent state bodies and increased institutional responsibility for maintaining quality and compliance with European requirements. Andreeva and D. Dimitrova define it as a guarantee for the quality of educational services and the integration of European standards into the national norms, recommending “de lege ferenda - a comprehensive modernisation of the legal framework in the field of higher education” with coordination of the actions of the competent state authorities and higher responsibility of higher education institutions

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for the quality of education and its compliance with European requirements (Andreeva, Dimitrova, 2021). A significant reform in secondary education is the establishment of quality management as a dual process, combining external evaluation with institutional self-assessment (Chapter Fifteen of the Law on Pre-school and School Education - LPSE). Hadzhigeorgieva examines the social "portrait" of inspection through the lens of the mission and goals of the National Inspectorate of Education and the norms of the state educational standard for inspection (Hadzhigeorgieva, 2022). Georgieva's conceptual framework explores the personal and professional attributes of experts, emphasizing how education quality is assessed through various observation and evaluation methods. The framework also considers the advantages and limitations of organisational self-evaluation and external evaluation in relation to the expert's role in providing assistance and support to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Georgieva, 2023). Ensuring high quality education is a priority at national, regional and institutional levels, making it essential to plan strategically and establish conditions for sustainable quality. Research has outlined strategic approaches to achieving this goal, such as a vision for the development of institutions within the preschool and school education system (Georgieva, 2022). In Bulgaria, it is noteworthy that the repeal of Regulation No. 16 of 8 December 2016 on quality management in institutions has resulted in the absence of self-assessment as a state educational standard. However, relevant institutions retain the capacity to undertake self-assessment, thereby facilitating the identification of successful practices and areas for improvement. Hristozova-Docheva proposes a general model for quality assessment in school education using software tools, which can also serve as a model for self-evaluation (Hristozova-Docheva, 2023). The effectiveness of self-evaluation is contingent upon the capacity of educational institutions to engage in critical analysis of their institutional status and the assurance of quality across specific indicators. This is of particular significance as it completes the quality management cycle and establishes the link between strategic management, self-evaluation and appraisal in school organisations (Goereva, 2020).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

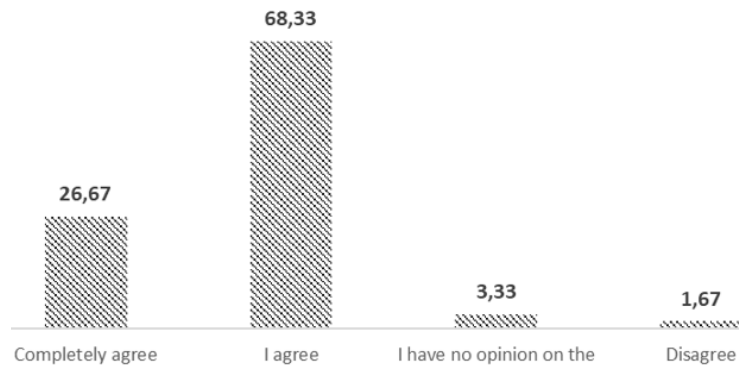
Between November and December 2024, a survey was conducted among 60 students enrolled in the "Educational Management" programme. The survey aimed to examine their competencies and attitudes towards the quality of education focusing on concept definition, regulatory frameworks in preschool and school education, and the level of university training. The survey was designed to develop self-assessment skills for quality management in kindergartens or schools, which served as key research criteria. The survey instrument was structured into three primary domains: (a) knowledge and skills related to educational quality and its management, (b) attitudes toward the significance of the issue, including self-assessment and collaboration, and (c) competencies cultivated at the university level, aimed at applying knowledge and skills in real-world educational management settings, as part of the self-assessment competencies. The results were analyzed based on predetermined criteria.

3. RESULTS

The students were presented with several definitions of the quality of education and asked to select the one that best aligned with their understanding. More than half of the respondents (51.67%) supported all definitions, while 38.33% selected the most comprehensive one, which defines the quality of education as a set of characteristics of the educational process that contribute to achieving goals and policies related to students' knowledge, skills and competencies, the degree of development of their personal qualities and social competencies, and the satisfaction of societal, parental, and student needs. Based on a structured definition of quality management, students were asked to indicate their level of agreement. The majority responded positively, with 68.33% agreeing and 26.67% fully agreeing. Only a few students expressed neutrality (two respondents) or disagreement (one respondent) (Chart 1). Similar results were obtained when examining students' acceptance of both sides of quality management - external and internal (self-evaluation). A majority (65%) agreed, while around 20% strongly agreed. Meanwhile, 1.67% had no opinion, and 11.67% expressed disagreement, a percentage worth noting given national efforts to implement self-evaluation (Chart 2).

Diagram 1. Respondents' level of agreement with defining quality management as a cyclical process

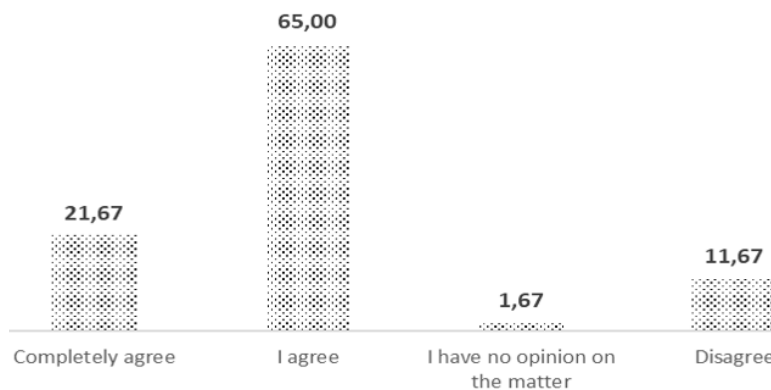
Educational quality management is a cyclical process that reports on the progress made by institutions against set targets, informs the public about the results achieved and supports the improvement of the organisation's performance.



Source: author's research

Diagram 2. Respondents' level of agreement with quality management as a combination of external evaluation and self-assessment

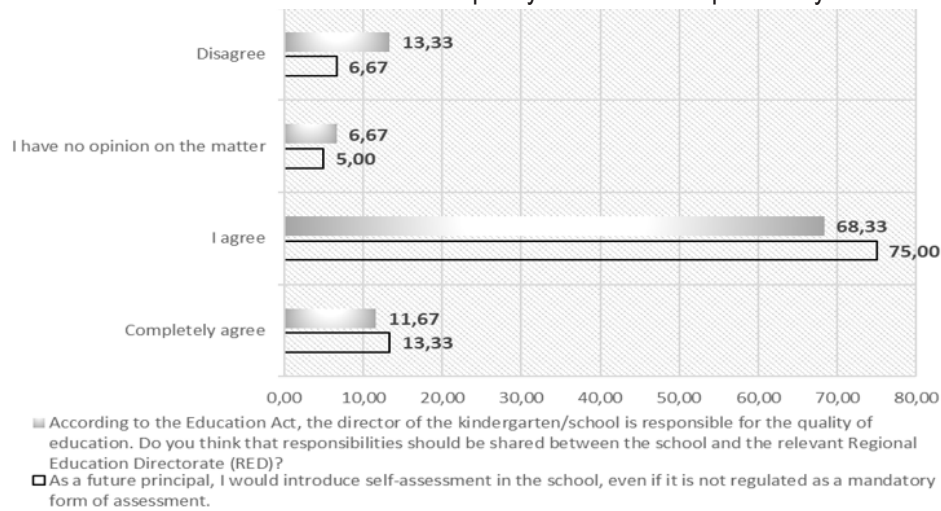
Managing the quality of education requires external assessment and self-evaluation that will lead to higher quality.



Source: author's research

Regarding the forthcoming implementation of self-assessment as a statutory or institutional initiative, respondents expressed readiness to adopt self-assessment systems in their schools. They also indicated willingness to collaborate and share responsibility for quality assurance with regional education authorities (REAs). Opinions among prospective managers were almost evenly divided on these issues. While the majority expressed a willingness to implement such systems, a smaller proportion expressed a strong agreement with this sentiment, a smaller proportion strongly agreed, and a few students remained neutral or held a negative stance. (Chart 3).

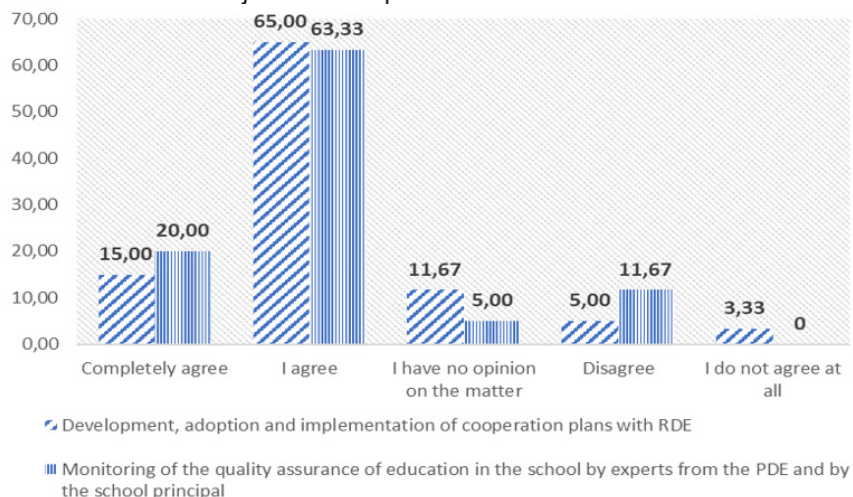
Diagram 3. Comparison between respondents' views on self-introduction of self-evaluation and collaboration with the QAA in quality assurance responsibility



Source: author's research

The adoption and implementation of collaborative plans for cooperation with the PDEs are priorities for 65% of respondents, who support working with the government to achieve high-quality education. Additionally, 15% fully endorse such cooperation. However, a significant proportion of 12% of the students expressed ambivalence, indicating a degree of uncertainty about the implementation of such initiatives. A further group of students expressed a negative view of the plans, with 3% disagreeing and 3.33% strongly opposing collaboration. A similar distribution of respondents' opinions emerged regarding quality assurance control. The majority of respondents (63.33%) agreed that "quality assurance control in school education should be carried out by experts from the PDE and the school principal", while 20% strongly agreed with this statement. However, 5% of respondents had no opinion, and 11.67% expressed disagreement (see Chart 4).

Diagram 4. Comparison of respondents' views on the implementation of joint quality assurance and joint control plans with the RQIA



Source: author's research

The students' self-assessment of their readiness for a future career as administrators is generally positive, with 51.67% of respondents expressing full confidence in their university education, believing it adequately prepared them for the role of school principal. However, 35% of respondents expressed reservations, and 13.33% remained ambivalent. A series of more specific questions were posed in the context of university preparation, some of which are addressed in the following statement. The responses given by the respondents were predominantly positive. The highest level of full agreement (35%) was reported for the ability to make managerial decisions based on facts, which was also the only question

that received no negative responses. The sum of positive responses was 96.67%. In contrast, the lowest level of agreement was reported for confidence in applying a competency-based approach (15% of them), though 73.33% indicated agreement, raising the overall positive response. Furthermore, 95% of students expressed a high degree of confidence in their competencies for effective communication, with full or partial agreement. Although only 16.67% of respondents expressed full confidence in their ability to create quality management tools, 75% responded “agree”, thereby increasing the proportion of positive self-assessment. Furthermore, a significant proportion of respondents expressed their ability to target resources for quality assurance, with a total of 91.67% responding in the affirmative. However, responses varied more regarding the application of a reflective approach (11.67% had no opinion) and a competency-based approach (10% had no opinion) (Table 1).

Table 1. Students' self-assessment of competences acquired at the university

	Is a reflective approach applied in training?	Is a competency-based approach applied to practical knowledge?	Do you believe you can purposefully select resources to ensure quality?	Do you read that you can make management decisions based on facts?	Do you believe you have the competencies to communicate effectively?	Do you think you can create a quality management toolkit?
Completely agree	20,00	15,00	16,67	35,00	30,00	16,67
I agree	65,00	73,33	75,00	61,67	65,00	75,00
I have no opinion on	11,67	10,00	5,00	3,33	3,33	5,00
Disagree	3,33	1,67	3,33	0,00	1,67	3,33

Source: author's research

4. DISCUSSIONS

With regard to the characteristics of quality, the questionnaire contained no incorrect answers, and the definitions covered various aspects of quality in a broader or narrower sense, which may explain why half of the students selected all the provided definitions. However, this suggests that the students may not have fully considered the options and instead selected answers superficially. This in turn, may hinder the comprehensive evaluation of quality when defining criteria and indicators for self-evaluation, whether legally mandated or initiated by an institution. Students have been led to believe that quality management is a cyclical process that reports on the progress made by institutions against set objectives, informs the public about the results achieved and supports the improvement of the organisation's performance and management decision-making at institutional, regional and national levels. Responses indicate a strong understanding and acceptance of quality management in its various aspects. The majority of respondents concurred that quality assessment should involve both joint external evaluation and internal self-evaluation. Furthermore, 75% of students aspiring to managerial roles, expressed readiness to implement self-evaluation in educational institutions, even without a mandatory regulatory framework. This finding is noteworthy, as it contrasts with the perceptions of school principals surveyed, who, have yet to show readiness for self-evaluation in institutions. Consequently, self-evaluation remains an optional practice under the current regulatory framework.

The respondents' agreement to share responsibility between the principal and the experts from the RSE demonstrates a willingness to cooperate, yet concurrently, there is a reluctance to assume self-responsibility as regulated by law. While students expressed a willingness to share responsibility, their inclination towards collaborative decision-making and shared control, that is to say, quality management, was less pronounced. Although the results are encouraging, the lower proportion of agreement and the presence of respondents with no opinion or negative opinion suggest that students have not yet fully developed their communication, collaboration and teamwork skills. Implementing self-evaluation requires principals to cultivate specific competencies to establish an organisational framework for the objective assessment of conditions, processes and outcomes within the institution. Additionally, it is essential to persuade educators of the necessity of mutual and objective evaluation of the educational process identifying both strengths and areas for improvement. The establishment of qualitative self-assessment systems with clear evaluation criteria and indicators is imperative. However, it is equally important to design a methodology for implementing these systems, analysing the results, and implementing further measures to ensure the quality of education. This is particularly relevant in cases where self-assessment is not formally integrated into the normative framework or national curriculum. Students have the capacity to provide a satisfactory self-assessment of their preparation; however, some students exhibit hesitation,

which is to be expected given their lack of practical experience and underdeveloped quality management systems in Bulgarian education.

The analysis of the students' responses regarding their attitudes towards quality management and their ability to apply university knowledge is comparable, which provides information on the fulfilment of the criteria within a close range. A correlation is observed between students' acceptance of quality assessment not only as a necessity but also as a method for improvement and sustainability, and the competencies acquired at university for developing quality systems. While students reported strong communication skills, they expressed reservations regarding their capacity to adopt a reflective and competency-based approach, indicative of their uncertainty concerning collaborative quality management with RQM. This suggests a deficiency in the necessary competencies and social attitudes required for effective collaborative management.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The contemporary education system must prioritise high-quality education in order to effectively prepare students and equip them with the necessary competencies for life in the 21st century. Establishing sustainable high-quality systems requires a dual approach: external independent evaluation and institutional self-evaluation. However, this two-way process is not yet established as standard practice in the Bulgarian mainstream school. In light of the conclusions drawn and the significance of the problem of educational quality and its measurement, the following recommendations can be made.

It is imperative that students are equipped with the competencies for collaborative management, engaging parents, NGOs, businesses and other stakeholders to enhance educational quality within the institution.

This necessitates the incorporation of more practical exercises in teamwork, collective problem-solving, and collaborative decision-making.

To ensure the sustainability of the aforementioned processes, and thereby the quality of education provided to children and students, collaboration between the PDE and schools is recommended. Such collaboration would facilitate the assessment of the level of quality of education achieved, the joint development of an assessment toolkit, and the collaborative planning of institutional development and improvements to the quality of education. These plans should be subject to joint monitoring and measures taken for sustainability and growth.

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