

APPROACHING "QUALITY OF EDUCATION" IN ROMANIAN AND FINNISH EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Tatiana MARIAN (TUTUNARU) ^{a}*

^a Valahia University of Târgoviște, Romania

ABSTRACT

The concept of "quality" is fundamental in the education system because the improvement of the training process and the identity of the school, allow the verification of results and provide a guideline for research and continuous improvement. Evaluation and quality have become major policy issues in education around the world, simultaneously act as strong governance mechanisms at the national and transnational levels.

This paper, through the systemic analysis of quality assessment proposes the presentation of two different ways of approaching it, in the education systems of Romania and Finland, each of them personalizing the values and options of educational policy, in a common European intercultural space.

KEYWORDS: *educational policy, evaluation, Finnish educational system, quality assurance, quality system.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The meaning of "quality education" is that of a solid pedagogical and developmental education that educates the student to become an active and productive member of society. A quality education is not one that is measured by a score, which would mean doing a disservice to both the student and expression "quality education" itself. A quality education is one that focuses on the student - the social, emotional, mental, physical and cognitive development of each student, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status or geographical location from which he comes. It prepares the child for life, not just for testing.

Quality assurance involves a systematic review of the educational offer to maintain its quality, equity and efficiency. It includes school self-assessment, external evaluation (including inspection and evaluation of teachers and school leaders) and student evaluations.

Building strong quality assurance systems are essential to support inclusive and high quality education in a European education area. It is also important to support the implementation of the Council of Europe recommendations on key competences for lifelong learning and the promotion of common values, inclusive education and the European dimension of teaching in 2018.

Additionally, quality assurance is essential to create the conditions that facilitate student mobility across Europe, in particular through greater transparency and trust. Quality assurance also plays a key role in supporting the mutual recognition of higher secondary qualifications and the results of periods of study abroad.

Quality management refers to the practices, processes or systems used by the educational organization to plan, implement, monitor and develop the quality of its operation. Quality

* Corresponding author. E-mail: tatiana.tutunaru@gmail.com

management can be understood as a general concept that includes quality assurance, development, management and leadership, self-evaluation being part of quality management.

2. CONCEPTS OF QUALITY EVALUATION AND MEASUREMENT.

Recent research in the field of education policy has addressed the issues of quality assurance and evaluation from two theoretical perspectives: as a tool for distance governance and as a manifestation and means of introducing new public management reforms in education and other social fields (Ferlie, Musselin & Andresani, 2008; Miller & Rose, 1990).

Governance is understood here as a specific way of managing. Her thinking is based on different habits, desires and behaviors of people, culture or organizational perspective. This managerial approach means that the subject maintains a considerable degree of autonomy and participates "voluntarily" in the process initiated from the center to model his behavior (Miller and Rose, 1990, p. 14). Remote governance can impose the logic of the center on scattered and diverse places and can generate a common "space of discipline and possibility" (Lawn & Grek, 2012, p. 82).

This ability to create cohesion and communality in the midst of diversity makes this way of governing appropriate for the most complex political tasks, such as "creating Europe," as described by Lawn and Grek (2012).

Quality assessment and assurance procedures can set and implement special standards in various ways to measure the work of educational institutions, thus legitimizing the rewards and punishments of the authorities. The evaluation process generates digital information, which is then used to develop governance strategies and plans, as well as comparisons and benchmarks, which have become useful management tools.

The data production process changes the behavior of the subjects who produce it, making them think according to certain rules and pay attention to specific and predetermined aspects of the evaluated phenomenon. Data collection redefines practice by logic, especially when the evaluation process poses a high risk to the persons and institutions evaluated by reallocating funds or other decisions.

Quality assurance procedures involve increasingly self-assessment practices. Although these practices may seem arbitrary and self-initiated, they must be consistent with prescribed baseline indicators and standards and focus on continuous self-regulation and self-improvement (Lawn & Greek, 2012). Another tool is the publicity of evaluation results, which now appear in various rankings, evaluations and reports published and prepared by the commercial media to regulate the daily decisions and actions of consumers of educational services.

This development can be perceived as the empowerment of a certain privileged category of citizens (as political subjects) from whom educational institutions are expected to influence through the rational and informed choice of consumers.

Another perspective on the evaluation and quality assurance as governance tools is elaborated in the specialized literature that studies the reforms in education. They are based on the ideal of transplanting market mechanisms, primarily competition, profitability and empowering managers, stakeholders and consumers, to the public sector (Diefenbach, 2009; Hood, 1991).

3. APPROACHES ON THE EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN ROMANIA AND FINLAND.

In Romania, ensuring the quality of education and the compatibility of the national education system with the European system of education and training, the strategy of the Ministry of Education established as the first coordinate: Ensuring the quality of education. In this approach, as a starting point is the argument of the need for continuous training of human resources specific to

the education system and the development of good practice guidelines that have resulted in the following:

- a) the establishment of the specialized institutional structures - Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education and Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education;
- b) elaboration of some standards and performance indicators for the accreditation of educational units.

The first step in this direction was made with the adoption of the O.U.G. no. 75/2005 on quality assurance of education, approved by law no. 87/2006. According to these normative acts "The quality of education is the set of characteristics of a study program and its provider, through which the expectations of the beneficiaries are met, as well as the quality standards"

The evaluation of the quality of education consists of the multicriteria analysis of the extent to which an organization providing education and its program respect / meet the quality and reference standards. The quality assessment process through which the education organization itself carries it out is called internal evaluation. When quality assessment is carried out by another body - a national or international profile agency, it takes the form of an external evaluation.

For the external evaluation of the quality of education, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ARACIP) and the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) are established by the same normative act.

Quality assurance of education expresses the ability of an education provider to provide education programs in accordance with applicable standards.

The methodology of institutional evaluation of education providers, with subsequent amendments and completion (H.G. 993/2020), includes the following components: **Criterion:** fundamental aspect of the organization and functioning of an organization providing education.

Standard: the description of the requirements, formulated in terms of rules or results, which define the mandatory minimum level of accomplishment of an activity in education.

Reference standard: a description of the requirements that define an optimal level of achievement.

Performance indicator: tool for measuring the degree of accomplishment of an activity.

Processes:

- Planning and effective achievement of expected learning outcomes;
- Monitoring the results;
- Internal evaluation of results;
- External evaluation of results;
- The continuous improvement of results.

Domains:

A. **Institutional capacity:** structure, management, resources,

B. **Educational effectiveness:** study programs, learning outcomes, employability, financial activity of the organization,

C. **Quality management:** strategies and procedures for quality assurance (on the initiation, monitoring and periodic review of programs and activities performed, on the periodic evaluation of the quality of the teaching staff) accessibility and transparency.

In **Finland**, the quality of education, as a means of satisfying the requirements and needs of students, their parents, the labor market and society, is ensured through continuous research aimed at developing the child's maximum potential, toward a passion for learning. Thus, the quality of education aims to create trust through openness to the beneficiary and by designing innovative solutions for the benefit of the student.

The **Finnish National Agency for Education** (EDUFI) is a national development agency operating within the Ministry of Education and Culture, preparing basic national curricula for general

education, early education and requirements for skills-based vocational qualifications. The agency also participates in the preparation of educational policy decisions and regulates, guides and provides recommendations on decision-making.

The four impact objectives of the Finnish National Agency for Education guide the agency's operations, they are the following:

- Equality in education and internationalization increases.
- The well-being of students improves.
- Lifelong learning increases the level of competence.

The **Finnish Education Assessment Center** (FINEEC) is an independent authority that functions as a separate unit of the Finnish National Agency for Education and is responsible for the assessment of preschool education and care, education and training at national level. FINEEC assessments cover the entire education system, from education and childcare to higher education.

The institution conducts evaluations and supports the education and care of children, education and training providers, as well as higher education institutions in the development of their quality management and evaluation activities.

The forms of services provided by the education system include assessments of learning outcomes, assessments and audits in the field of quality of education provided by schools, accreditation offered to higher education institutions leading to a EUR-ACE quality label for engineering study programs. and evaluations of education and training programs in the maritime sector. The Finnish center also provides evaluation services internationally. For example, it conducts audits of schools that follow the Finnish model of education abroad.

FINEEC supports education providers in the development of quality management in the following ways:

- by producing evaluation data for quality development needs;
- by evaluating the quality management systems of the organizers;
- by producing information on quality management and development practices and by spreading them across the borders of different levels of education;
- by supporting early childhood education and care providers, schools, educational institutions and higher education institutions to take advantage of national assessments and self-assessments and to strengthen the perspective of assessment based on improvement;
- by supporting quality management, development and assurance;
- by developing evaluation systems, support material and evaluation tools;
- providing training and guidance on quality management and evaluation.

The laws governing Finnish education govern the duty of preschool / pre-school education and care providers, education and training providers and higher education institutions to assess the education they provide and their functioning. However, the laws do not define in more detail what should be assessed and how the assessments should be implemented.

Pre-university education is evaluated externally through activities to evaluate learning outcomes, and various thematic and system evaluations.

The purpose of the *external evaluation* is the following:

- To produce knowledge for developing teaching and optimal decision making;
- To ensure educational equity and teaching quality;
- A tool for guidance and information development in schools;
- Systematic data acquisition;
- Provides information / support, at national and regional level, to teaching and education providers, as well as to schools.

The assessment of the quality of general secondary education in Finland is performed through enrollment examinations and provides up-to-date annual monitoring data on how students have

acquired the knowledge and skills in accordance with the general curriculum and the maturity required based on the objectives of general secondary education.

FINEEC's thematic and systemic assessments provide information on, for example, upper secondary school pedagogy or the higher education skills of upper secondary school students.

Act on the Finnish Education Assessment Center no. 1295/2013 with subsequent amendments and completion (no. 1231/2020) includes the following concepts of quality assessment and management:

Quality culture – is defined by the way the organization defines quality in its operations and how its quality and importance are understood within the organization. The school organization can define in more concrete terms what the culture of quality means in its operating context. For example, quality culture can describe the atmosphere for development within the organization.

Accreditation: the award of a certain quality label or license to an educational organization or program based on an evaluation process. An accreditation is public recognition and proof that an educational organization or study program has met the criteria established for accreditation.

Audit – an independent and systematic external evaluation. Audits are institutional evaluations focused on operations and / or quality management of the educational organization. FINEEC audits evaluate the procedures that the educational organization uses to maintain and develop the quality of its activities.

Bench learning – is a tool for organizational development. It is based on a mutual learning process in which organizations share information, knowledge and experiences. Through the basic study, the organization can gain peer-to-peer feedback on its activities, as well as gain new perspectives and ideas for the further development of the organization and its activities. Benchlearning can occur at the individual level, at the organizational level or at the network level.

Criteria – refers to a reason for evaluation. It explains what kind of activity, and result or quality level is desired. The criterion can be quantitative or qualitative and is defined before evaluation. The evaluated activity or quality management are evaluated according to criteria. Based on this, conclusions can be drawn about how well the activities or quality management meet the established criteria.

Evaluation based on improvement – aims to develop activities. The methods applied in the evaluations based on improvements are inclusive and interactive. The evaluated organization can develop its activities already during the evaluation. The results of the evaluations improve the activities. In the improvement-based approach, the trust between the party implementing the evaluation and the evaluation participant is emphasized, as well as the responsibility of the educational organization for developing its activities. The evaluation methods are adapted according to the objectives and theme of the evaluation.

Evaluation – an interpretive analysis of the object examined, and includes the element of evaluation – highlighting the value or making a value judgment on an issue or activity. For example, the evaluation may mean that the activities are compared with the objectives, rules, criteria or results that have been set. The evaluation includes the systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of information about activities. The purpose of assigning a value distinguishes research evaluation.

Indicator – a qualitative or quantitative measure. An indicator can express an attribute, a state, a level or changes of the examined object, thus serving as a basis for measurement. An indicator is a concrete and verifiable description of the desired properties of the activities.

Peer review – is based on peer review in which independent external experts provide feedback on the organization's activities. Peer reviewers (or reviewers) often represent the organization or community similar to the one being evaluated.

Quality factors related to the process – describe how the objectives set, content and other activities are implemented in practice. The structural and quality factors of the process work in interaction.

4. INSTITUTIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION.

In **Romania**, the actors involved in **ensuring and evaluating the quality** of education are:

- Educational actors (teachers, students, parents, school management, etc.) – with responsibilities in generating quality education;
- Commission for evaluation and quality assurance (CEAC), organized in each school – with attributions of internal evaluation (self-evaluation) of the quality of the educational services offered;
- School inspectorates – with the role of quality control of education;
- Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ARACIP) – which plays the role of external evaluation of the quality of education;
- Ministry of National Education – with the role of regulating and implementing the ways of organizing, controlling and evaluating the national education system.

In **Finland**, because of the autonomy enjoyed by schools, more emphasis is placed on the **internal evaluation** of each school-assessment based on its own criteria and methodologies.

The actors involved in ensuring and evaluating the quality of education are:

- Educational actors (teachers, students, parents, school management, etc.) – with responsibilities in generating quality education;
- Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) – responsible for preparing national school curricula and preparing educational policy decisions;
- Finnish Center for the Evaluation of Education (FINEEC) – responsible for evaluating the education and care of preschoolers, education and training at the national level;
- Ministry of Education – is responsible for strategic development and for ensuring the normative framework in vocational education and training.

5. THE CURRENT STAGE AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF ACTION OF THE APPROACH TO ACHIEVE A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN ROMANIA.

The methodological framework for evaluating the quality of education in Romania was initiated by the O.U.G. no. 75/2005 on quality assurance of education, approved by law no. 87/2006 followed by a series of legislative acts on the functioning and organization of the agency, the code of professional ethics, the methodology of institutional evaluation and standards (for the authorization, accreditation and periodical evaluation of the pre-university education units). The latest legislative changes are related to the new evaluation methodology (H.G. 993/2020) and the new standards (H.G. 994/2020), applicable from September 1, 2021.

ARACIP is currently working on the development and publication of guides and tools useful for internal and external evaluation of education: guidelines for the application of the new standards, valid and applicable from September 1, 2021, as well as summary sheets that will promote the operationalization of schools by requirements of the new assessment standards.

To ensure and increase the quality of pre-university education in Romania, the national project "Educated Romania" initiated by the President of Romania, restores society to values, developing a culture of success based on performance, work, talent, honesty and integrity. The operationalization and implementation of the project is based on a set of strategic objectives and targets, as well as new organizational scenarios for education, which will affect improving learning outcomes at all levels. In this context, the County School Inspectorates will be replaced by the County Centers for Pre-University Education (CJ-IP). ARACIP will be represented, at county level, by the County

Directorates of Quality Assurance and School Inspection (DACIS). These county structures will carry out school inspections, institutional evaluation of the quality of pre-university education, will grant accreditations and authorisations for temporary operation to state and private education units.

CONCLUSIONS

We believe that quality management "creates" quality education, which in turn provides resources and policy guidance to ensure that every child enters school healthy, learns and practices a healthy lifestyle, learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults, is actively involved in learning and is connected to the school and the wider community; has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified adults and is academically challenged and prepared for success in college or further education, for employment and participation in a global environment.

As analyzed in previous chapters, it appears that the internal evaluation of the quality of education (relative to learning outcomes) through the application of quality improvement measures is more relevant than the external evaluation. In this sense, the peculiarities of Finnish education include increased trust in teachers' skills, and the system being decentralized, there are no even school inspectors.

The Finnish value system in relation to quality is based on education, not the accumulation of goods. This is true throughout life. Statistics show that adults prefer to spend money on a continuing education program than on a state-of-the-art phone. This is a value system formed in the family, consolidated in the school, then put in the service of the country.

In Romania, which is entering the second century of existence as a modern and unitary state, education must be based on true values, to acquire a solid and predictable foundation, on which to continue the road to quality education. There is a need for a profound reform of education, based on a coherent vision and focused both on solving existing problems and anticipating the needs of a society in the process of transformation.

We consider, in conclusion, that quality education can be supported by three key pillars: ensuring the access of all students to quality teachers, use of quality learning tools and professional development and creating safe and quality learning environments.

As a structure of the evaluation stages of the school units as it is performed in the analyzed European countries, it can be observed that they are the same as those in Romania except for the last stage – the consequences of the evaluation. The results of this stage are communicated and published in the analyzed European countries and this aspect is not found in Romania. There is no classification of schools according to performance and no monitoring by local authorities. Local authorities in both EU countries as well as in Romania they own the schools but in the analyzed countries the degree of their involvement is very high.

The Romanian education system requires clearer goal setting, definition and measurement of results, while giving schools operational autonomy, empowering consumers and introducing greater accountability of schools to the public, and the use of performance-based funding schemes to stimulate improving the quality of education provided.

The internal and external evaluation of the quality of education promotes a certain "culture of responsibility" and influences both the way of thinking and acting of teachers and students. The mechanisms for collecting data and publishing the results of the evaluation serve the same purposes, allowing benchmarking using specific indicators.

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