

# **SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION: A BUREAUCRATIC OBLIGATION OR AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION QUALITY IMPROVEMENT**

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## **Abstract**

Since the 1980s, education policies in many European countries have aimed at decentralization by giving educational institutions greater autonomy and responsibility for overseeing the quality of the provided education, while introducing or intensifying accountability measures. During recent years, an effort was made in Greece to promote the institutionalization of school self-evaluation and to enable the continuous assessment of education quality. Nevertheless, evaluation remains inactive or is partially implemented. Self-evaluation can be described as a process that starts from the school itself, in which carefully selected participants make a systematic description and evaluation of its operation, to make decisions or take initiatives for overall school development. In self-evaluation the initiative lies primarily with the school itself which chooses the means to be used and the participants. Because self-evaluation is conducted for the purpose of school improvement, stakeholder involvement, open school climate development, and transparency become critical factors. The aim of the present study was to investigate the attitudes of teachers working in a secondary education special school on the necessity and the prospects of self-evaluation in the Greek educational system and on how it should be designed and implemented to improve education quality. For this purpose, we conducted qualitative research using semi-structured interviews. Our research results show that if we want self-evaluation to be an essential tool, not just a bureaucratic obligation, it should focus on responsibility sharing and on promoting the collective character of all stakeholders involved in the educational process. Self-evaluation should help develop relationships of dialogue and cooperation, and a climate of trust among those involved, aiming not to control but to improve education. That is, to identify weaknesses and problems and to create the conditions for the improvement of educational practices by introducing innovative actions. At the same time, teachers should be given the opportunity for continuous feedback, which will enable improved planning and implementation of the related pedagogical interventions.

**Keywords:** School Self-Evaluation, School Development, Education Quality Improvement

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1980s, education policies in many European countries have aimed at decentralization by giving educational institutions greater autonomy, greater responsibility for overseeing the quality of their education while introducing or intensifying accountability measures (Ranson, 2011). In recent decades, self-evaluation has gained prominence in school processes as a valuable tool for the involvement of students, teachers, parents in the process of quality assurance and school improvement (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008).

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Models of Educational Evaluation**

In the education field one can identify two main directions in relation to evaluation models: A. The

technocratic one, based on quantitative indicators, in which the evaluation process acts as a control mechanism while its success depends on setting specific and measurable objectives, B. The humanitarian model that focuses on the process and puts emphasis on goal setting by the school itself and on its own improvement.

Models of educational evaluation can be categorized into:

- Goal-oriented models: These ones emphasize control over the achievement of the goals that have been set (Katsarou & Dedouli, 2008).
- Models of measurement of educational effectiveness: These models put emphasis on the learning process, on the curriculum, etc. to evaluate differences in student performance.
- Participatory models, in which evaluation is a human-centered process with emphasis on participant interaction (Katsarou & Dedouli, 2008).
- Models of scientific judgment, which emphasize the evaluator's scientific judgment and experience that ensure evaluation objectivity and reliability.
- Management decision models: Emphasize the collection, processing and analysis of the data that are necessary for decision making.
- Models of school self-evaluation: These ones focus on the need to change structures, procedures, relationships, and school culture and emphasize both school and teacher autonomy.

## **2.2. School Self-Evaluation**

Self-evaluation can be described as a process that starts from the school itself, in which carefully selected participants make a systematic description and evaluation of its operation, to make decisions or take initiatives for overall school development. The scientific literature suggests that self-evaluation should ideally include an orientation towards quality assurance and improvement. However, this dual function seems to be difficult in practice (Vanhoof & Petegem, 2009).

## **2.3. Dimensions of Self-Evaluation**

Self-evaluation is associated with dimensions that are necessary for its successful implementation: accountability, school improvement, organizational change, cultivation of an evaluation culture. In many cases, self-evaluation is largely about external accountability: schools need to document their work and demonstrate that they utilize the resources provided to them (MacBeath, 2005). The framework used refers to measures of school effectiveness. Alternatively, a school's self-evaluation efforts may be aimed at improving the school more directly. The content of the evaluation in such cases is context-oriented (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Self-evaluation can play an important role in maintaining a balance between internal and external accountability, providing the relevant information for evaluating education quality (e.g., the degree of resource utilization, dropout rates, etc.). With accountability the school itself can identify what could contribute to its own improvement.

## **2.4. Self-Evaluation Strong Points**

Improving the quality of education involves total school development: a multilevel learning and leadership interaction whose complexity and non-linear relationship has been highlighted by relevant research. Schools are traditionally more action-oriented rather than reflective, but it is reflection and feedback that provide important information for quality improvement (Earley & Bubb, 2009). For a qualitative self-evaluation, the process should be clearly targeted leading to widely accepted and specific results.

School culture and member attitudes are crucial (Vanhoof et al., 2009), since they know better than anyone what is feasible and what is not, and in which areas they should give priority and which not. When the team is properly informed about the purpose of self-evaluation, time is sufficient, attention is given to thorough preparation, then confidence and trust in self-evaluation is enhanced leading to increased chances of widespread support (Earley & Bubb, 2009). Differences in self-evaluation outcomes are closely related to stakeholders' attitudes and the extent of its inclusion in school policy (Vanhoof et al., 2009). A mere external guidance of the self-evaluation process does not guarantee quality improvement.

In self-evaluation the initiative lies primarily with the school itself which chooses the means to be used and the participants. Because self-evaluation is conducted for the purpose of school improvement, stakeholder involvement, open school climate development, cooperation, transparency, and trust become critical factors. It is important for teachers to feel that they co-decide and that their needs are supported by appropriately designed actions. In this way they develop feelings of process-ownership and they willingly become

implementers of serious initiatives (Kyriakides & Campbell, 2004). The culture of collaborative practices and the effort to promote authentic learning enhance teacher engagement. Responsibility and self-commitment are cultivated as a "bottom-up" process, strengths and weaknesses are identified, goals and priorities are set, initiatives for improvement are taken (Barth, 2001).

## **2.5. Self-Evaluation Weaknesses**

Weaknesses of self-evaluation include the lack of systematicness and the inability to draw conclusions as these require special knowledge (Vanhoof et al., 2009). Also, among possible causes of the limited self-evaluation application in some countries, including Greece, is the largely introverted school culture that has not yet been sufficiently oriented towards the communication with the wider school environment. In general, teachers do not feel familiar with data collection and analysis and usually do not have the necessary research skills (McNamara et al., 2011).

Many schools are not able to produce satisfactory and clear self-evaluation reports which means that schools should look for the means of conducting adequate self-evaluations and be willing to accept instructions on how to do so (Blok et al., 2008). In addition, it is extremely difficult to relate self-evaluation outcomes to an action plan for purposes of school improvement (Plowright, 2007). In general, it can be concluded that school staff don't often have a sense of ownership or responsibility for the quality of education. Participation in self-evaluation is considered a burden on the program, due to the bureaucratic and time-consuming nature of the relevant procedures.

## **2.6. Self-Evaluation and European Education Policy**

The main concern of a modern European education policy, which aims to enhance authentic learning, should be the cultivation of 21st century skills that will enable every learner to become a complete and conscious European citizen. In this context evaluation makes sense when it helps teachers to improve their practice and develop their skills, evaluates both the process and the result, measures and monitors the progress and improvement of the education system.

In general, data at European level show that schools differ significantly in the choice of self-evaluation tools and their actual use. These differences seem to come from different perspectives on self-evaluation but also differences in its organization and implementation (Schildkamp et al., 2009). Schools that can be described as culturally innovative, have shared leadership, collaboration, and effective communication are more likely to adopt self-evaluation practices. Vanhoof et al. (2009) revealed a strong link between the application of self-evaluation practices and improved teaching and teacher collaboration. Similarly, proper implementation and acceptance of self-evaluation are associated with better outcomes when participants are convinced that they can personally contribute to improving the quality of education and are therefore more committed to the process (Schildkamp et al., 2009). To contribute to the improvement of the school and thus to the quality of education, every effort for self-evaluation must be of the same sufficient quality. Criteria of such quality are the content of self-evaluation, the conditions under which it is conducted, accountability and the opportunities for school improvement.

## **2.7. Self-Evaluation and Greek Education Policy**

Following similar trends in other European countries, the evaluation of the Greek education system was instituted, which was linked to decentralization and strengthening of school autonomy. In 2010, the Greek ministry of education introduced self-evaluation, with the aim of improving the quality of educational work and creating a culture of evaluation. During school years 2010-2012, a self-evaluation project was piloted for the first time in the Greek education system. 600 schools were included, and the results were considered satisfactory (Bagakis, 2017). Planning and evaluation procedures for the quality of the educational outcomes were developed and action plans were formulated, implemented, and evaluated. During the school year 2013-2014, a mandatory implementation in all schools was planned, but teacher distrust and the absence of information resulted in being treated as another bureaucratic process. For the successful introduction of self-evaluation as an innovative process, two important conditions must be met: systematic information and stakeholder consent (Bagakis, 2017).

## **3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

### **3.1. Research Purpose**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the attitudes of teachers in a Greek secondary education special school, on the necessity and the prospects of self-evaluation in the Greek educational system and on how it should be designed and implemented to improve education quality.

### 3.2. Research Questions

A. What are the attitudes of special education teachers towards the implementation of self-evaluation and its introduction in schools?

B. What are the attitudes of special education teachers about how self-evaluation should be planned and implemented, so that it doesn't become a routine and bureaucratic obligation but a quality improvement tool instead?

### 3.3. Research Methodology

To investigate teachers' perceptions on self-evaluation we conducted qualitative research, using semi-structured interviews, as a tool for collecting qualitative data. Semi-structured interview uses pre-designed questions but at the same time provides freedom and flexibility to discuss other issues that arise during the discussion (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989). In addition, although the structure of the process resembles that of a questionnaire, it gives the opportunity to investigate in depth several detailed aspects, such as the respondent's behavioural motivations, which are not revealed by the questionnaire.

The interview was conducted on an individual level and provided the advantage of interpersonal communication and directness between the participant and the researcher. It was based on an interview guide created after studying the relevant literature (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The research questions were the starting point for the construction of the guide and the questions. The researcher was generally flexible and adapted the questions to the flow of the interview. He had previously created an encouraging environment for participants to express freely their opinions.

### 3.4. Participants / Process

Our research sample consisted of 12 teachers, 3 males and 9 females aged 28 to 48 years, working in a Greek secondary education special school. They came from different environments, urban, semi-urban, island but also different economic and family - educational levels. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes and took place in a school office after the end of the participants' school obligations or in their free time. Prior to the start of each interview, a briefing was given on the subject and purpose of the research followed by assurances of confidentiality. During the interview, the researcher used the necessary technological equipment to record the answers.

## 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 4.1. Analysis Methodology

To analyse the collected information, a content analysis was chosen, and continuous comparison and coding of data was applied. In the open coding process facts, objects, actions, and interactions that have conceptual relevance or are semantically related are placed into categories. At the data analysis stage, grouping of concepts into categories is important because they have the potential to explain and predict properties and dimensions. At the axial analysis stage, the correlation, and the connection of categories in terms of properties and dimensions were applied (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A conceptual analysis was applied, based on common elements and the emergence of concepts. After being identified, classified, comparatively analysed, and correlated, conclusions were extracted and formulated. The main areas of interview analysis, after the coding and categorization process were "attitudes towards the implementation of the self-evaluation", and "attitudes on how to design and implement self-evaluation".

### 4.2. Results

Regarding our first research question on "teachers' views on the implementation of self-evaluation", the results show that teachers consider self-evaluation important and necessary for the improvement of school, teachers, and students. Through self-evaluation, the problems, as well as the positive aspects of the school (as an organization), are identified. Therefore, the Greek authorities should aim at the implementation of the self-evaluation not arbitrarily but using certain criteria, based on cooperation, trust, meritocracy and objectivity to function properly, constructively and without a punitive mood. Evaluation in an educational organisation is important when it promotes teacher and school development.

Indicatively, we mention the following participant statements:

*P1: In my opinion school self-evaluation contributes to the organizational culture of the school and to building of trust.*

*P3: I believe that self-evaluation should be the basic process for the report and diagnosis of a school's*

condition, to identify weaknesses and strengths.

*P4: (...) perhaps many teachers, due to fear of negative evaluation, would try to improve their work and offer more to students' daily lives, (...) all schools should be involved in this process.*

*P11: I would agree as much as possible with the statement [regarding self-evaluation] if I knew that it would offer something substantial (...) the school would be evaluated objectively by worthy judges.*

Regarding the results about the 2nd research question, namely "teachers' views on the design and implementation of self-evaluation so that it becomes a tool for quality improvement", teachers believe that the Greek education system is bureaucratic, with an obvious lack of cooperation and school autonomy. Fragmented reforms try to provide a solution, but the result is heart-breaking and provokes reactions, confusion, and mistrust. Therefore, they believe that schools should be given more autonomy and opportunities for initiatives so that school members can become the driving force and improve school life. Self-evaluation must be applied in combination with radical changes in the way modern Greek public schools operate, under organized efforts, coherence, and sequence. There should be a common orientation, overall mobilization, dialogue, and cooperation so that strengths and weaknesses are identified through evaluation. However, more importantly there is a need to unhook self-evaluation from a bureaucratic character and give emphasis on goal setting, action, and teacher active participation.

Indicatively, we mention the following participant statements:

*P2: (...) the design and implementation must be consistent (...), shouldn't be done by one person only but with the consultation and cooperation of all different specialties.*

*P5: I believe that parameters should present a plurality, be more objective and should not deviate from the purpose of evaluating all educational factors.*

*P8: [Self-evaluation] shouldn't act as a bureaucratic or punitive tool (...), immediately creates negative feelings, distrust, and unwillingness to cooperate.*

*P10: In my opinion the objective should be the consistent and continuous improvement of teaching practice, the qualitative upgrade of school life (...) improved administration and operation of the educational system.*

*P12: (...) self-evaluation initiatives must consider scientific developments and any changes the country's educational and social dynamics allow.*

## **5. CONCLUSIONS / SUGGESTIONS**

School self-evaluation is applied in almost all European countries, with successful results in most cases. During recent years, an effort was made in Greece to promote the institutionalization of educational evaluation and to enable the continuous assessment of quality and goalsetting. Nevertheless, evaluation remains inactive or is partially implemented.

Using semi-structured interviews as our research tool, we examined the attitudes of special education teachers on the necessity and prospects of self-evaluation as well as how to implement it to improve school quality. Our research findings show that in general staff attitudes towards self-evaluation and its application are positive, provided that certain conditions are met. At the same time, the views of the same staff on how to implement it focused on the need to unhook self-evaluation from its bureaucratic character and to emphasize teachers' active participation. Our research has shown that for self-evaluation to be an essential tool, not just a bureaucratic obligation, it should focus on responsibility sharing, on promoting the collective character of all stakeholders' involvement in the educational process, (teachers, students, parents, local community, etc). The process should help to develop relationships of responsibility and cooperation, and a climate of trust between those involved, aiming not to control but to improve education. That is, to identify weaknesses and problems and to create the conditions for the improvement of educational practices by introducing innovative actions. At the same time, teachers should be given the opportunity for continuous feedback, which will enable improved intervention planning.

Given the valuable opportunities it provides for making suggestions and enhancing a sense of ownership among all those involved, school self-evaluation has come to stay. Self-evaluation can play an important role in the process of ensuring the improvement of the school as the opportunities it offers are the main conditions for the implementation of a sustainable process aimed at the overall quality of education. Therefore, there is a need for enhanced state efforts to use self-evaluation as an incentive for all schools, not just for those with room for improvement. The combination of self-evaluation and facilitating the ability to change school culture can lead to better student care and higher quality education. In this regard, a framework of criteria is needed which will be useful not only for scientific purposes but will serve as a

guideline for strategic action in practice. An appropriate and comprehensive framework can help teachers and school leadership at all levels invest in self-evaluation content and process and achieve tangible results.

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