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development"

**"OPTIMIZING THE FUNCTIONING OF THE
KINDERGARTEN THROUGH THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERNAL
MANAGERIAL CONTROL TOOLS"**

DOCTORAL THESIS
-SUMMARY-

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Key words: learning activities, quality, communication, internal managerial control, decentralization, evaluation, involvement, optimization, procedures, reflection, standardization.

Introduction

Achieving an effective management of the educational unit is a permanent objective of its management, regardless of the level of education we refer to, a fact that determines the concern for the search, identification and adaptation of appropriate strategies in this regard. Starting from the definition regarding the optimization of education, which "aims at its permanent modernization, i.e. taking strategic and operational measures, which ensure its continuous and dynamic adaptation to the current and perspective requirements of society" (Bocoș (coord.), Răduț -Taciuc & Stan, 2018, p. 379), optimizing the functioning of the educational organization takes into account the same aspects.

As educational organizations acquire increasing autonomy in designing programs and managing resources, the role of the director becomes increasingly important, and it is necessary to recognize his influence in contributing to the improvement of organizational results (Schleier, 2012). The kindergarten, as an educational organization, is registered, from the point of view of institutional autonomy, in the category of those that can benefit from decision-making freedom (having legal personality), establishing and pursuing its own objectives.

In Romania, relative to the total number of educational units, kindergartens have the largest share. Cluj County is among the few counties in the country that has over 40 units with legal personality among kindergartens, their representativeness for research being definitely supported. Following the restructuring of the school network carried out over the last years, it is noted that almost 40% of the counties have an extremely low number of kindergartens with legal personality (below 10 units). This aspect highlights a low degree of concern and understanding of their specifics, given that early education is a permanent challenge, which is not limited to the care of preschoolers, but acquires, year after year, new educational values, with a major impact on society future.

The theme proposed for the research responded to the challenges found at the kindergarten level in terms of effective ways to optimize learning activities with preschoolers, but also at the institutional level, having as benchmarks concepts such as "quality in education and quality education" (Cristea, 2008, p. 107). The research aimed at carrying out a study at the level of Cluj county, following the implementation of unitary instruments specific to managerial activities in kindergarten. The instruments used in the research are regulated, as a structure, in legislative documents in force, but the statistics made so far do not highlight their impact on the quality of organizational activities, being presented only at a quantitative level.

The absence of highlighting the influence of documented procedures in educational units on the quality of the management of learning activities, although they are found as tools both in the internal managerial control and in terms of quality assurance, represented a challenge that was considered in the research. We note, at the same time, that, up to the present moment, there is no research in Romania, at the level of preschool education units, that analyzes the effects of these tools on specific activities, the present research being part of this area of interest.

The previous experiences and the results obtained at the level of a kindergarten led us to approach the chosen research topic with the aim of verifying the effectiveness of the tools created in order to optimize the functioning of kindergartens with legal personality in Cluj County.

The research also aimed to analyze the possible factors that can influence the involvement of teachers for preschool education in the decision-making process and communication at the internal level: managerial experience, the size of the kindergarten (as territorial dispersion), the status of the staff (titled, qualified/unqualified) (Iosifescu et al. , 2013), under the conditions of valuing the director as a catalyst of the educational organization (Kitchen et al., 2017), but also as a pedagogical leader (Schleicher, 2012).

The doctoral thesis with the title "Optimizing the functioning of the kindergarten through the implementation of internal managerial control tools" is structured in two parts: the theoretical foundation and the study carried out at the level of Cluj County, each part having several chapters. Complementing them are the Conclusions, the bibliography and the appendices. The work contains a number of 252 pages, 32 figures, 83 tables and 21 annexes.

The first part, entitled **Theoretical foundation**, comprises three distinct chapters, structured in such a way as to capture aspects specific to each level of management in a kindergarten.

Thus, in **chapter I**, entitled **Current trends in the institutional management of the kindergarten**, elements associated with the management level are captured, especially from the perspective of the decentralization of the educational organization and the primary role of its leader in influencing its members to achieve the set objectives (Vlăsceanu, 2003).

According to what some authors have stated, in order to strengthen its organizational component, the kindergarten, as an educational institution, must implement a real quality management, developed, in essence, for organizations and which "mainly manifests itself in two essential aspects : the organization of financial and human resources in the long term, a real, efficient and effective quality management" (China, 2015, p. 282). The implementation of such management presupposes the manifestation, at the level of the educational organization, of financial, administrative and pedagogical decentralization.

The analysis of institutional autonomy from the three perspectives shows us that the weights of the administrative and pedagogical segments are significantly more present from the point of view of decision-making autonomy, in relation to the financial segment. **Even if on the administrative and pedagogical segments the level of autonomy is higher than from the financial point of view, the latter directly influences the other two segments. In this context, we can list the important dimensions of kindergarten** management on which the manager can intervene to manifest decentralization:

- human resources management;
- curriculum management;
- communication management;
- risk management.

At the same time, another aspect highlighted in this chapter refers to the managerial functions (design/planning, organization, control/monitoring, evaluation and regulation) manifested at the management level, which naturally involve **managerial responsibility**. Although managerial responsibility is found at all levels of management in the kindergarten, the top level (unit management) largely assumes the processes carried out through managerial functions, and it is necessary to emphasize the role of the other two management levels involved. In this sense, the interdependence between the three levels of management is reflected by the degree of achievement of the entity's objectives, the degree of achievement of the performance indicators at the level of the committees or the group is interrelated, directly affecting that of management.

The successful exercise of managerial functions, at all management levels within the kindergarten, requires the development of harmonious relationships between all those involved.

The relations between the management levels in the kindergarten presuppose permanent exchanges of messages, decisions, attitudes, manifested according to the roles assumed at the moment by all those involved, in the conditions where the efficiency of communication "reflects the very essence of the educational act" (Stan, 2010, p. 115). This fact correlates very well with the ways of communication at the kindergarten level, which are the key tools in managerial activity. Thus, we refer to organizational communication, managerial communication and didactic communication, which can be associated with the three levels of management existing in the kindergarten and which are in a relationship of obvious interdependence and interconditioning. The better each member of the organization knows his role and assumes it at any level of management, the more his involvement increases, contributing to the optimization of the processes carried out here, at the same time emphasizing the decentralization process.

Participatory management can be manifested in the context of decentralization, whose essential principle refers to the fact that the decision-making process belongs to those involved in the educational organization, and the valorization of human resources is an essential condition. Motivating employees is an essential condition for their involvement in participative management. The role of the manager is to create and support a stimulating environment through which pre-school teachers assume belonging to an organizational culture to the construction of which they bring their input and pursue the achievement of the objectives established together.

Control, as a managerial function exercised by the director at the level of the didactic department, is carried out in the form of inspection, translated into activity assistance for monitoring all aspects related to the educational process: design, organization, implementation and evaluation of learning activities. The assistants carried out by the director represent evaluation actions of the teaching staff in their areas of competence at the group management level, but also for the adjustment/optimization of the didactic approaches and personal and professional development.

Promoting a democratic approach, an active and interactive, educational and cognitive attitude, through the prism of the values of effective managerial communication, another form of inspection, assumed at the kindergarten level by all teaching staff, refers to mutual assistance. Here, the three levels of management (of management - through the director, of the Curriculum Commission - through its manager, of the group of preschoolers - through the assisted teaching staff) are intermingled very well. In this context, the performance of the supporting teaching staff is very well highlighted, by assuming and sharing examples of good practices at the kindergarten level, capitalizing on and, at the same time, developing their "professional skills and their own teaching experience" (Bocoş, Catalano, Avram & Someşan, 2009, p. 145).

At the same time, together with the director of the kindergarten, the participating teachers exercise several roles by being involved/self-involved in activities on the three management levels. Depending on the effectiveness of the Curriculum Committee and group management, the director can adjust the top management by re-evaluating the objectives, design, organization, control/monitoring and evaluation of the specific activities assistance in order to reduce/eliminate the aspects that need improvement, to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of learning activities.

In **chapter II**, entitled **Quality management from the perspective of the standardization of internal instruments specific to kindergarten**, a series of principles of quality in educational organizations are presented, relevant aspects for internal managerial control and quality assurance systems, common elements of the two systems at the commission level, the role of internal evaluation in the educational organization, as well as that of documented procedures in kindergarten.

In the specialized literature, *quality* is seen from two perspectives: the first aims at the conformity of the results with the initially established (preset) objectives, and the second aims at the permanent transformation, the ability to adapt to the current needs of the organization, which is constantly changing. It is about doing the right and necessary things, not just doing the expected things (Sallis, 2002).

The quality management system in an organization is specific to it and cannot be standardized on a large scale. What we can standardize, however, are the requirements, the recommendations, the elements that provide a unitary point of view on the quality assurance measures and to which we refer when we want to establish the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of quality standards.

Kindergarten can be approached from two perspectives: as a public entity (with legal personality) and as an educational organization. Both perspectives aim at internal evaluation by making all levels of management responsible for the efficient and effective management of all internal processes to achieve the proposed objectives, but also by reporting to external standards.

In the context of decentralization, for the kindergarten, these two perspectives, internal managerial control and quality assurance, through existing standards, represent milestones in institutional development, with the aim of optimizing its operation and access to performance and excellence.

The implementation of the managerial control system in the kindergarten requires the identification of specific elements, of the evidence that attests to the operation of each standard, respectively of the performance indicators proposed in the institutional design documents. The correlation of managerial internal control standards with managerial functions supports the successful implementation of managerial internal control in the preschool education unit.

Institutional development, adding value to it, involves orientation towards reference standards, but formulating own objectives and performance indicators, depending on existing resources and needs (China, 2015). In this sense, the institutional self-assessment (component of the Quality Management field) is extremely important and implies "the transition from a compliance inspection...to internal assessment" (2015, p. 255) which allows the qualitative improvement of all processes. Thus, the performance indicators associated with this field and which were targeted in the research paper are:

- the existence and application of institutional self-evaluation procedures;
- quality management of learning activities at the level of the organization;
- professional development of staff;
- evaluation of the quality of the activity of the teaching staff;
- the establishment and operation of structures responsible for internal quality assessment.

Every educational organization aims to continuously improve the quality of the education provided, with particular reference to the teaching-learning-evaluation processes carried out within the learning activities with preschoolers. The essential role in monitoring the quality of these processes rests with the kindergarten manager by implementing a quality management system necessary to lead to their effectiveness and efficiency.

Therefore, it is absolutely necessary for the actors of the educational organization (kindergarten) to be involved in the internal evaluation process by permanently reporting to the objectives and performance indicators established and assumed, but also to the external evaluation standards, in the conditions that, as much as the decentralization is deeper, the more the need for standardization is imposed, and "the internal evaluation must be subject to external validation" (Chiş, 2005, p. 52). Internal evaluation must become a priority, and the kindergarten must implement its own methods and tools that allow it to evolve by optimizing its functioning.

Thus, the Plan-Do-Check-Act Cycle (PDCA) is an effective internal evaluation tool that can be applied at the kindergarten level in all the processes carried out within it. Starting from the duties of the Monitoring Committee and the Evaluation and Quality Assurance Committee at the kindergarten level in terms of documented procedures, the use of the PDCA Cycle allows for their permanent review in order to improve the quality of the management of learning activities. In this sense, the use of the PDCA model implies permanent internal evaluation to allow fixes, changes, adaptations of the documented procedures specific to the identified activities, considering that each stage precedes and succeeds another stage, influencing each other.

Because the two systems (internal managerial control and quality assurance) must be implemented in the education system, in the research paper I followed their correlation in order to optimize the operation of the kindergarten. So, we wanted to highlight ways of associating internal managerial control standards with those specific to the quality management system (quality standards), with an emphasis on the common element of the two systems: documented procedures (Standard 9-Procedures), taking into account the complexity of the managerial internal control system.

"Documented procedures represent the specific way of carrying out an activity or a process, edited on paper or in electronic format" (OSGG no. 600/2018, p. 11). In other words, the procedure represents the "steps" that must be followed in carrying out activities at the kindergarten level (Bocoş (coord.) et al., 2019). A procedure answers the questions: who does a certain activity? what activity needs to be done? how exactly will that activity be carried out? when and where will the activity take place? what will be the results of that activity? (Guide of the Commission for the evaluation and quality assurance in pre-university education units – part II, 2007).

The development of documented procedures is a complex process that assumes that "every action/process that takes place in the organization will have to be accompanied by a procedure" (China, 2019, p. 105). However, not all activities in kindergarten are procedural (procedural). In this sense, starting from the documents that guide the activity of the kindergarten, especially the Management Plan, procedural activities are selected that represent "significant activities for which generally valid rules and ways of working can be established, in order to fulfill them, under regular conditions, economy, efficiency and effectiveness, the objectives of the department and/or public entity" (OSGG no. 600/2018, p. 4). The director of the kindergarten, in collaboration with the Monitoring Commission and the Evaluation and Quality Assurance Commission, inventories the procedural activities at the level of the kindergarten, coordinates the development of specific documented procedures, aiming to meet the established objectives and performance indicators.

An important aspect refers to the fact that the development of documented procedures is an exclusive attribute of the kindergarten (in our case), given the fact that the internal staff knows its operation best, can propose updates, changes to the processes, documents, depending on existing realities. The involvement of staff in the process of reviewing and improving procedures ensures their operation, motivating them to find the most effective solutions in the development and evaluation of activities.

The documented procedures are part of the specific tools for internal managerial control and, through their complexity, also refer to the other internal managerial control tools (objectives, means, information system, organization, control). Carrying out the documented procedures in a responsible way, their assumption by all those concerned, leads to the correct and timely fulfillment of the tasks, to the achievement of the proposed objectives and the targeted performance indicators. Their efficiency is given by their customization according to the specific activities of the institution, but also by adapting to the changes that have

occurred, revising, in other words, to respond to existing needs, to be real instruments of institutional regulation and direction.

Chapter III, Management of learning activities in kindergarten, addresses issues regarding the Curriculum for early education (2019), the roles of the teacher for preschool education from the perspective of achieving an effective management of learning activities, ways to optimize it, the reflective practices found at the level the group.

The new curricular approach in early childhood education (with reference to pre-school education) aims at key competences as a benchmark in establishing the goals of the early childhood education stage. "The curriculum for early education is centered on the physical, cognitive, emotional and social development of children, respectively on the early remediation of possible developmental deficiencies" (Pânișoară & Manolescu (coord.), 2019a, p. 77).

The need to know the level of development and to track their optimal development, in all five areas of development, is one of the changes that support the paradigm of the new Curriculum. The second change refers to the real focus on the need to demonstrate the skills and abilities of each child, "in a modern vision, in which play has a high weight and in which the role of reflective activities and partnership between teaching staff and between teaching staff and parents can greatly influence the child's educational path." (Support for explaining and understanding some concepts and tools with which the Curriculum for early education operates, 2019, p. 5).

The early childhood education curriculum gives the pre-school teacher freedom, but also responsibility in designing and integrating the curriculum, in organizing, conducting and evaluating learning activities. The freedom offered to the preschool teacher in curriculum design represents one of the current trends in curriculum management, being an important element of *pedagogical decentralization*. Thus, at the level of individual operative curricular management, we are talking about "the self-responsibility of teaching staff in the direction of the realization of curricular approaches" (Bocoș & Chiș, 2013, p. 329).

If the school manager is the director of the kindergarten, the educational manager (the teacher for preschool education) is the leader of the educational act in direct relation with the preschooler (Dietrich et al., 2003). Managerial functions specific to the director (design, organization, monitoring/control, evaluation) can be found in the activity of the preschool education teacher combined in a specific manner and capitalized according to the needs identified at the level of the preschool group. Even if, from a financial point of view, decentralization is less present, the quality of the educational act is the attribute of the teaching staff, who has the *freedom to construct the curriculum* to come up with "added value" and which allows kindergarten access from efficiency and effectiveness to performance and excellence, in the context of *pedagogical decentralization*.

Regardless of the level of kindergarten management in which the preschool teacher is involved, the impact he can have, to an overwhelming extent, is mainly manifested at the group level, within the activities with preschoolers. Optimizing the management of the learning activity implies that educational practice must be supported by critical reflection, "the practice of personal mastery (...) being achieved through individual reflection" (Senge, 2016, p. 87). By correlating individual self-evaluation with personal reflection, institutional self-evaluation with collective reflection, we can state that the objectivity of the first association determines the efficiency of the second and, thus, the internal evaluation of the organization becomes objective, allowing the self-regulation of efforts to improve the quality of all processes. When new insight leads to improvement or change, reflection becomes reflective practice (Welsh Government, 2015).

In order to encourage the teacher's reflective behavior for preschool education, the 2014-2015 Methodical Letter for Preschool Education promotes the Reflection Sheet "with

the aim of making the respective practices points of discussion and reflection for professional development" (Methodical Letter for Preschool Education 2014 -2015, 2014, p. 2). The elements highlighted in the Reflection Sheet cover three dimensions: preschool teacher-child interaction, child-child/group of children interaction, preschool teacher-colleagues/other professionals/parents interaction

If for the education teacher the Reflection Sheet is a necessary and useful tool, we have proposed the manager's Reflection Sheet, which will certainly support the kindergarten director in developing his own managerial skills and, implicitly, in optimizing the kindergarten by implementing strategies that support development this one. Considering the directions addressed in the research paper, the dimensions contained in the Manager's Reflection Sheet refer to: principal-teacher interaction, teacher-teacher interaction/kindergarten teaching staff, principal-preschoolers interaction. The manager's reflection on the mentioned aspects, the way, the frequency with which each weekly self-evaluation item is highlighted, gives him the leverage to achieve an effective managerial communication, shows teaching staff a model regarding the manifestation of the interrogative, proactive attitude of self-management.

The manifestation of personal reflection by each teacher of the kindergarten leads to collective reflection, which has the effect of adopting some interdependent actions between them, with the aim of obtaining a common result, assumed at the level of the educational organization (Bocoş, 2013). The resulting diagnosis, the critical approach to the manifested interpretations, provides the manager with an overview of the subsequent steps regarding the improvement of the management of learning activities (Day, 2003; Morgan, 1997). The closer the discussions are to each teacher's own teaching practice, the more valuable the professional judgments become, and this fact increases the quality in the educational organization, the change being necessary to be achieved in an upward, not downward, way i.e. through internal evaluation, not external.

How can we "measure" the quality of teachers for preschool education, what are the directions for improvement in order to optimize the management of learning activities?

Starting from these questions and taking into account the concerns of education researchers regarding the professionalization of the teaching career, we inevitably discuss a system of professional skills necessary for the teaching staff "as an acceptable standard for the exercise of the profession" (Bocoş et al., 2019; Şerbănescu, Bocoş & Ioja, 2020, p. 20). The formation of this system of professional skills takes place within the initial and continuous training programs specific to the targeted fields of activity. If the training of basic professional skills is represented by the finality of the initial training, continuous training develops these skills and offers the possibility of training new, complementary ones (Şerbănescu et al., 2020). In this sense, practice and reflection play an overwhelming role.

Following the concept of modern pedagogy through which the teacher must adapt to the students, there are several components of didactic professionalization that support precisely this aspect: to master the methodology and contents of learning; to build learning experiences according to the potential of the beneficiaries; to know effective group management strategies; ensure school success for all beneficiaries; to use modern technologies in teaching and learning; collaborate with family and community to create a positive learning environment; to be reflective practitioners (Chiş, 2005). The changes that have occurred in recent years, the need to adapt preschool education teachers require rethinking the strategies for approaching learning activities with preschoolers from the perspective of the previously presented components, supported by continuous training activities based on the identified needs.

A way that allows for an x-ray of the needs to optimize the management of learning activities refers to the planning/assistance program that the director and the person in charge of the Curriculum Committee in the kindergarten can carry out.

According to Desimone (apud Ceobanu et al., 2020), one of the elements of an effective training program is collective participation, i.e. the participation in the same training program, in the same period, of several teaching staff who teach the same specialty. Such a program refers to mutual assistance, carried out according to a specific procedure, taking into account the fact that teachers can learn from each other, being within reach for this fact to happen (Keen & Tirca, 2000). The interassistance program is closely related to that of the assistantships because the latter offer indisputable benchmarks in the valorization of the areas of competence of the assisted teaching staff, but also in those that require improvement. In other words, pre-school teachers who demonstrate real competence in one or more areas (designing, organizing, conducting and evaluating learning activities) become mentors to others within the inter-assistance program and beyond.

Mentoring is a "complex professional activity, carried out by a mentor teacher that involves, in detail, the specific action of pedagogical mediation, guiding the activity, facilitating learning and professional development, counseling, support, guidance, offering professional experiences beneficial, integration in (micro)community" (Bocoş (coord) et al., 2018, p. 100). The manifestation of the mentor role in the two dimensions (for beginners and for the other teaching staff) is carried out simultaneously, being considered a form of expanding experience and increasing motivation (Şerbănescu et al., 2020). The mentor's guidance leads to "increasing the effectiveness of reflective practice" (Bernat, 2012, paragraph 4). At the same time, interassistances allow preschool teachers to initiate proposals regarding their own training needs identified following personal reflection or following the exchange of experience with colleagues, the feedback received (Pollard, 2014) and offered in a collegial manner (Little, 1990), in this way the level of decision of those directly involved is manifested in a real way at the level of the unit.

Within these continuous training programs at the kindergarten level, we can talk about the presence of decentralization elements (financial by ensuring the resources necessary for the activities – video projector, internet; administrative by the elaboration of procedures, internal documents; pedagogical by the freedom of curriculum construction, of continuous training programs) , by the interpenetration of the three levels of management, doubled by a participative management that encourages effective managerial communication, in a specific framework regulated by documented procedures adapted to the activities of the kindergarten, all of which facilitate the optimization of the management of learning activities.

The second part of the thesis, entitled **Influences of documented procedures on the quality of management of learning activities in kindergartens. Study and application in Cluj county**, includes two chapters: one dedicated to the investigative approach carried out and the other to the analysis and interpretation of the obtained data.

Chapter IV, called the **Research Coordinates**, presents the premises of the research, its purpose and objectives, the research questions, the research hypotheses and variables, details regarding the subject and content samples, the research methodology and stages, the validation of the instrument (questionnaire) used in the research.

The daily challenges in kindergartens, related to the freedom of the pre-school teacher in terms of designing, organizing, conducting and evaluating learning activities, the need to assume effective strategies to achieve quality management (as a European benchmark), led us to approach the research theme with the aim of verifying the efficiency of some tools created in order to optimize the functioning of the kindergarten, taking into account, in particular, the quality of the management of learning activities.

The freedom offered by the Curriculum for Early Education (2019) to the preschool teacher (pedagogical decentralization) is complemented by the freedom of decision offered to the kindergarten manager through the other segments: administrative and financial decentralization. The effective capitalization of these aspects, by assuming responsibility, allows the creation of specific instruments for the institution that support the achievement of the proposed objectives and the manifestation of the assumed performance indicators.

To improve the quality of the management of learning activities, there is a need for reflection, self-evaluation, evaluation from as many perspectives as possible, aimed at those who are the main actors in the didactic approach: preschool teachers. The involvement of each level of management in the kindergarten in the evaluation process requires collaboration, communication, providing feed-back, so as to capture as faithful an image of reality as possible. An OECD study from 2013 (OECD, 2014) highlights several aspects related to the collaboration between teachers, but also to the frequency with which they receive feed-back at the level of the educational unit:

- most teachers teach individually;
- 50% state that they rarely or never teach in a team with colleagues;
- 66% of those surveyed do not participate in demonstrative lessons of colleagues;
- 58% do not receive feed-back from any colleague;
- 46% state that they never receive feed-back from the director;
- 51% say they never receive feed-back from any member of the management team;
- in Romania 40% receive feedback from the appointed mentor.

The statistics capture some essential aspects that we believe influence the teacher's well-being and, implicitly, the quality of the management of learning activities: the low degree of exchange of best practices at the level of the organization, of the feed-back expected from higher levels of management, but also from fellow practitioners. Thus, a rethinking of the relationships between the management levels within the kindergartens and the identification of optimal strategies for their operation, depending on the specific elements of each of them, is required.

The central element of the investigative approach relates to the documented procedures and was a common denominator for the management internal control system and for the quality assurance system. Previous experience in the field of kindergarten management entitled us to bring to the attention of the participants in the investigative study a series of tools relevant to the entire managerial process of a kindergarten, tools that can be adapted and customized easily, keeping, however, the essential aspects that guides existing procedural activities. Also, following discussions with the directors of kindergartens with legal personality in Cluj county, the segment of documented procedures represents a permanent challenge at the institutional level, the need for reporting to unitary, standardized instruments, specific to preschool education units, is felt, in order to make it more efficient and optimization of all actions carried out.

Starting from the premises presented above, in what follows we describe the concrete strategy used during the actual research.

The purpose of the research was to establish the effectiveness of documented procedures specific to kindergarten managerial activities on the quality of the management of kindergarten learning activities.

The objectives of the research were the following:

- decanting directions for optimizing the management of learning activities in kindergartens in Cluj county;
- elaboration of documented procedures specific to managerial activities at the level of kindergartens in Cluj County;

- implementation of documented procedures specific to managerial activities at the level of kindergartens in Cluj county;
- identification of interdependence relationships between the components and dimensions targeted in the research;
- creating a procedure guide specific to managerial activities in the kindergarten.

The investigative approach started from the following research questions:

- What are the decanting directions in order to optimize the management of learning activities in kindergartens in Cluj county?
- To what extent do the documented procedures specific to managerial activities influence the management of learning activities in kindergarten?

In developing the general hypothesis of the research, I took into account personal experience and theoretical aspects regarding the dependence between documented procedures and the quality of the management of learning activities.

The general hypothesis of the research: the use of documented procedures specific to managerial activities in kindergarten leads to an increase in the quality of the management of learning activities.

A series of **secondary hypotheses** of the research were pursued, considering the complexity of the investigative approach and the need to capture as many correlations as possible between the targeted elements:

- the use of documented procedures specific to managerial activities in the kindergarten leads to the optimization of intra-institutional communication;
- the use of documented procedures specific to managerial activities in the kindergarten leads to an increase in the weight of the involvement/self-involvement of teachers for preschool education in the decision-making process;
- there are significant differences between principals and teachers for preschool education regarding the scores given for all research variables;
- seniority does not influence the answers given for each research variable separately;
- the status of the respondent in kindergarten influences the answers given for each research variable separately;
- the location of the daily activity impacts internal communication and involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process;
- internal communication, involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process and documented procedures are significant predictors for the quality of the management of learning activities.

Starting from the general hypothesis, we established the following variables:

The independent variable: the use of documented procedures specific to kindergarten managerial activities in kindergartens in Cluj county.

The dependent variables:

- management of learning activities;
- intra-institutional communication management;
- the degree of involvement/self-involvement of teaching staff in the decision-making process.

The research took place in kindergartens with legal personality in Cluj County. The data were collected online, among the staff of kindergartens in Cluj County, between October 2020 and April 2021.

The target group involved in the research was selected on a voluntary basis from kindergartens with legal personality and related structures in Cluj County. **The sample of subjects** included 396 respondents, of which 40 participants (representing 10.1% of the total) held the position of director, and 356 were teachers for preschool education (representing 89.9% of the total); 72.7% of them carried out their daily activity in

kindergartens with a form of legal personality organization (PJ), and the rest of the participants in kindergartens that represented their structures; 78% of the participating staff had the status of holder (employed for an indefinite period), 21.5% of qualified substitute (employed for a fixed period, having appropriate studies for the position), and 0.5% of unqualified substitute (employed for a specified period, without appropriate studies position); the most consistent seniority groups in the current position occupied, in terms of the volume of subjects, were the groups with seniority between 11-20 years (30.1% of the total) and 0-5 years (25% of the total), and the most the group with more than 25 years of age, with 12.9% of the total participants, was reduced in terms of the volume of subjects (Figure 1).

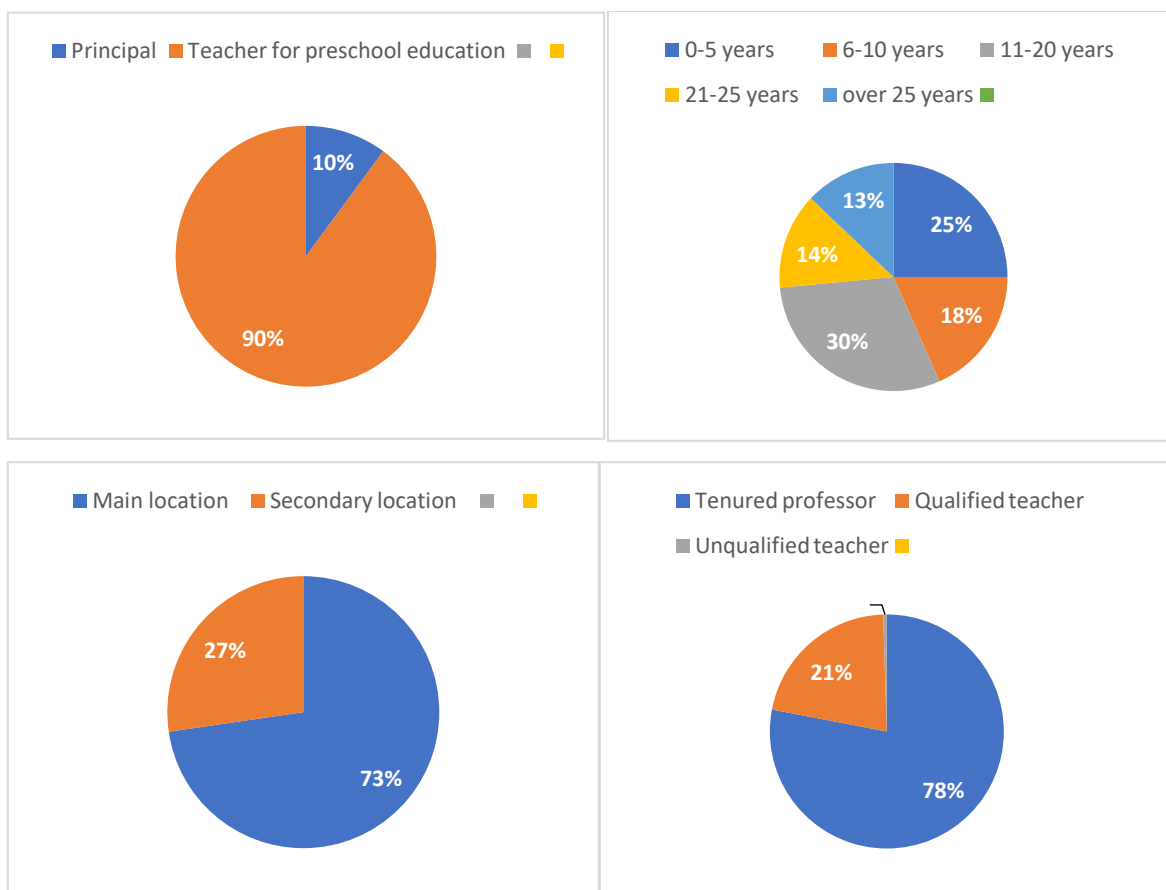


Figure 1. Brief description of the sample of subjects used in the research. Source: own processing in SPSS

The content sample concerned scientific contents involved in the three levels of management: management, commissions, group. The problem was shaped around some managerial components/dimensions: management of learning activities, internal communication, involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process, documented procedures. The materials used were supported by legislative documents in force: Curriculum for early education-2019 – principles and values, behavioral indicators, annual study themes, categories of learning activities, daily schedule, the form for assessing the individual progress of the child before entering primary education, design elements; The National Education Law - key skills for the graduate profile, principles and elements of decentralization, normative acts issued by the Ministry of Education - curricular principles, basic professional skills, teacher assessment areas, categories of continuous training activities, roles at the level of the organization educational, methodical letters, etc., being

retrieved and correlated in order to support the proposed investigative approach. Thus, the documented procedures guided the actions of those involved in the study, being used as unitary/standardized tools in the design, organization, implementation and evaluation of activities at all existing management levels in kindergartens.

Any scientific research approach needs to be structured on the basis of a coherent, rigorous design, according to the current requirements of pedagogical research, addressing a theme that aims to bring added value through the expected results. The investigative approach was organized in large groups, collectives from kindergartens with legal personality in Cluj county, following the issue of improving learning activities through the implementation of specific tools and procedures. Regarding the type of research, action research was used, the investigators being directly involved in the research (Bocoş, 2003), and the focus was on a specific problem, analyzed under specific conditions, without aiming to obtain scientific knowledge, but "to obtain knowledge focused on a particular situation and purpose" (Bocoş, 2003, p. 16).

In **chapter V, Research results**, the results related to each research stage are presented.

Considering the complexity of the investigative approach carried out at the level of legal personality kindergartens in Cluj county, in the following we summarize the conclusions reached during and at the end of it.

The research objectives were the basis for formulating the hypotheses and variables that were tested and circulated throughout the investigative approach. The correlations revealed by the analyzes of the research results allowed the drawing of some conclusions that constitute real diagnoses regarding the elements that can influence the optimization of the kindergarten's operation, but also the making of predictions in this sense. The use of the quality improvement tool at the kindergarten level (PDCA) and, implicitly, the management of learning activities, allowed us, starting from an objective internal evaluation, to adjust and optimize the proposed activities, subsequently standardizing the range of tools that produced significant positive effects at the kindergarten level.

The research questions resulting from the personal reflection of the researcher guided the steps towards establishing the purpose and objectives of the research, as well as the hypotheses that wanted to be tested. Starting from the fact that the central element of this investigative approach was the documented procedures, *the general hypothesis looked at whether the use of documented procedures specific to managerial activities in the kindergarten leads to an increase in the quality of the management of learning activities*. This hypothesis was supplemented by a series of secondary hypotheses aimed at teachers for preschool education: intra-institutional communication, involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process, possible differences in perception of the research variables from the perspective of the location of the activity (unit with legal personality or structure), of the position, status or seniority held by the respondents.

The pre-experimental stage was a complex one, marked by several sub-stages that contributed to the running of the formative experiment. Being a research carried out at the level of kindergartens with legal personality status in Cluj County, the following aspects were taken into account: obtaining the consent of the Cluj County School Inspectorate for its implementation; application of the target group data collection tool (questionnaire); conducting preliminary data analysis; identifying the possible directions of intervention in order to optimize the management of learning activities; the development of documented procedures specific to the identified directions.

The stage of the formative experiment (intervention) involved the dissemination of documented procedures in kindergartens, their implementation within specific managerial activities, actions carried out by directors. Also, the implementation of the documented

procedures in the kindergarten was monitored, as an attribute of the one who initiates the investigative approach, in a focus group with the directors of the kindergartens. During this stage, the direct intervention was on kindergarten directors through the delivery of documented procedures (Table 1), and on preschool teachers the intervention was indirect. Each director orchestrated in a personal manner, specific to the unit, the implementation of the documented procedures, respecting their structure, content and defining elements, having an essential role in the investigative approach. The results of the research from the post-experimental stage highlight the degree of influence of the principals on the sample of preschool teachers in kindergartens.

The name of the documented procedure	The level of kindergarten management involved
The system procedure regarding the preparation of procedures	Level of commissions
The system procedure regarding the codification of procedures at the unit level	Level of commissions
Operational procedure regarding internal communication	Leadership level, level of commissions, level of classroom
The operational procedure regarding the development of the schedule for monitoring the activity of all departments in the unit	Leadership level
The operational procedure regarding the preparation of the planning of the learning contents, of the annual theme for each group	Level of commissions, level of classroom
The operational procedure regarding the preparation of the weekly planning for the group	Leadership level, level of classroom
Operational procedure regarding the control of school documents	Leadership level, Level of commissions
The operational procedure for monitoring the activity of teaching staff through assistance	Leadership level, level of classroom
The operational procedure regarding the realization of inter-assistance at the level of the unit	Leadership level, level of commissions, level of classroom
The operational procedure regarding the organization and conduct of teaching activities carried out through technology and the Internet, as well as for the processing of personal data	Level of classroom
The operational procedure for carrying out the mentoring activity for beginning teaching staff	Level of commissions, level of classroom

Table 1. Documented procedures delivered to kindergartens during the research

The post-experimental stage consisted in the application of the data collection tool (identical to the one in the pre-experimental stage), the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained in the formative experiment. As an innovative element of the author of the research, at this stage the documented procedures used in the formative experiment were capitalized by creating and publishing a Guide of documented procedures specific to managerial activities in the kindergarten (system and operational), which is intended to be a

useful tool not only to kindergarten directors and pre-school teachers, but also to teachers at other levels of education.

The results obtained following the application of the data collection tool were analyzed and interpreted in the pre-experimental and post-experimental stages, making comparisons to discover if, following the intervention carried out in the formative experiment, there are statistically significant differences between the two stages and if validate/invalidate the general hypothesis, respectively, the secondary hypotheses.

Following the interpretation of the research data, the significant positive impact of the use of documented procedures in relation to the management of learning activities is found. Thus, *the general hypothesis is validated, being entitled to state that the use of documented procedures specific to managerial activities leads to an increase in the quality of the management of learning activities.* The validation of the hypothesis confirms the fulfillment of the purpose of the research, the documented procedures being effective in ensuring the quality of the management of learning activities. Also, after performing the multiple regression analysis, it was found that if the score of the documented procedures increases by one point, the score of the management of learning activities increases, on average, by 0.414 points (Table 2).

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	20.748	.886		23.410	.000		
	Post: Internal communication	.424	.065	.338	6.566	.000	.522	1.916
	Post: Involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process	.243	.068	.171	3.590	.000	.613	1.632
	Post: Documented procedures	.414	.075	.277	5.547	.000	.555	1.802

Table 2. Estimated coefficients of the multiple regression model, post-experimental stage.

Source: own processing in SPSS

In order for the score of the documented procedures to increase and, implicitly, the impact on the quality of the management of the learning activities, we propose the development of new procedures for the procedural activities that were not followed in the research, the revision of the existing ones by involving all the responsible subjects from each management level .

The research has captured several aspects from the perspective of the dimensions proposed for analysis, these being important because they can influence the achievement of the specific objectives and the proposed indicators, i.e. the efficiency and effectiveness of the activities.

The diversity found in a kindergarten, related to preschool teachers, gives specificity to organizational management, so the director has an extremely important role in defining the path to follow. The investigative approach, through the direct influence of the researcher on the directors, contributed to emphasizing this aspect. It is interesting to point

out the differences between the results obtained in the pre-experimental stage and in the post-experimental stage, related to the secondary hypotheses, following the performance of t-tests.

Validation, in the post-experimental stage of the secondary hypothesis regarding the fact that there are statistically significant differences between principals and teachers for preschool education regarding the scores given for involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process and documented procedures, after, in the pre-experimental stage, links were identified only with the variable related to the involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process, shows us the assumption of the importance of the use of documented procedures by the kindergarten directors, giving the same score to both variables. The documented procedures allow the exercise of all managerial functions in a manner specific to the organization, both through the way of conception and through the implementation process, being a real support for the director, under conditions of autonomy/decisional freedom.

Like the dimension related to the teaching function held, also in the case of the status held by the respondents, the variables that registered statistically significant differences in terms of scores are the same: involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process (in the pre-experimental stage) and, in addition, the procedures documented in the stage postexperimental.

Analyzing the involvement/self-involvement of teaching staff in the decision-making process, we observe that the average scores obtained are the lowest, in relation to the other analyzed variables, even if a slight increase is noted in the post-experimental stage. It is definitely necessary to motivate teachers by valuing their personal skills and demonstrating them at all management levels of the kindergarten, aspects that largely relate to the manager's ability to create and support a stimulating organizational environment, in which each member to assume a well-defined role. By distributing responsibilities to all management levels of the educational organization, the director develops a network of future leaders that ensures continuity of the vision, but imprinting a personal perspective (Schleicher, 2012).

Regarding seniority, we need to score the amount for each seniority group in the sample of subjects. The only group of constant seniority that had, in the pre-experimental stage, valid associations with the other seniority groups, is that of preschool teachers with more than 25 years of seniority. This group, although only 12.9% of the total respondents, managed to influence the average scores in the post-experimental stage. Thus, the secondary hypothesis regarding the fact that seniority does not influence the average scores obtained on each individual research variable is validated for all seniority intervals analyzed.

In other words, the expertise of preschool teachers with more than 25 years of experience is capitalized starting from the directions established in the pre-experimental stage, they become mentors for the other teaching staff, influencing their course. If we refer to the three basic components of reflective practice (Domingo, 2021), the professional and personal experience of preschool teachers with more than 25 years of experience reinforces the results obtained through reflection on their own work, thus explaining the influence as experts on the other seniority groups.

Highlighting the size of the location where the respondents work, in the pre-experimental stage there were links of medium intensity with both variables: internal communication and involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process. However, aiming to reduce the gaps between preschool teachers located in different locations, the directors created working groups, used unitary tools, succeeding in harmonizing the communication and involvement relationships between the members of the organization, regardless of the number of coordinated locations. Thus, in the post-

experimental stage, the secondary hypothesis according to which the location of daily activity impacts internal communication and involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process is not validated. And this situation (as in the case of the seniority dimension) can be explained by the influence of preschool teachers with more than 25 years of experience, considering the elimination of the impact on the two variables in the post-experimental stage. Likewise, reducing the differences in perception regarding internal communication and involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process reinforces the positive impact of standardization through the tools used, with positive effects on the quality of all processes of the educational organization.

Another aspect that attracted our attention, following the analysis between the research variables (Pearson correlation coefficients), refers to the fact that in the pre-experimental stage the correlation coefficient between the management of learning activities and documented procedures had the highest value, indicating the strongest link detected. Instead, in the post-experimental stage the correlation coefficient with the highest value and indicating the most intense connection was between the management of learning activities and internal communication (Table 3).

	Post: Internal communication	Post: Involvement/self-involvement in the decision-making process	Post: Documented procedures
Post: Management of learning activities	.612**	.517**	.583**

** significant at the 1% significance level

Table 3. Correlations between research variables, post-experimental stage. Source: own processing in SPSS

So, it follows that the communication relationships between the members of the organization are what contribute, in fact, to the realization of all activities in an efficient or less efficient manner. The values promoted to have effective managerial communication are found in the managerial approach/vision assumed and implemented in the kindergarten from the management level and continuing with that of the committees and the group. The strong correlation between the two variables, in the post-experimental stage, highlights an effective managerial communication, certainly supported by the values promoted at the kindergarten level. The process of developing, implementing and revising the documented procedures facilitates the professional dialogue, it is a complex phenomenon that involves intense connections at all management levels in the kindergarten, found successfully in the formative experiment.

Following the investigative approach, based on the analysis of the obtained results, we can answer the research questions. Thus, the decanting directions identified by the directors, in order to optimize the management of learning activities, prove to be effective, and can be taken over at the level of other educational institutions:

- the use of unitary/standardized tools that facilitate the organization and carrying out of activities aimed at the management of learning activities (documented procedures);
- the creation of work teams that capitalize on the previous experiences of the members of the educational organization, regardless of status, seniority or the location where they carry out their activity;
- promoting/encouraging the exchange of good practices between teachers for preschool education, with an emphasis on personal and collective reflection.

At the same time, the validation of the general hypothesis in the post-experimental stage confirms that the documented procedures anticipate the quality of the management of learning activities and have a significant positive influence on it.

The influence of the procedures documented in the research is also supported by the results obtained following the application of t-tests, they obtain higher scores both in terms of the position held, but also the status of teaching staff. The higher average scores in the post-experimental stage, associated with the principals, correlated with the validation of the main hypothesis, highlight the primary role they have within the educational organization in terms of optimizing the management of learning activities, and not only. The implementation of documented procedures, as internal managerial control tools, ensures and, in our opinion, facilitates the maintenance of quality standards assumed at the kindergarten level, minimizing the negative effects of risks related to the mobility of teachers for preschool education, internal communication or changes occurring at the level institutional management. The only condition for their functionality considers the need for their permanent review, in order to ensure effectiveness, efficiency, performance and even excellence in the kindergarten/organization.

The degree of autonomy of the kindergartens involved in the investigative approach is high, especially in terms of pedagogical freedom. The principals guide the teachers towards reflection, collaboration, involvement, motivating them permanently by recognizing their professional merits, with the aim of ensuring their well-being and, implicitly, creating a favorable context for achieving quality management of learning activities with preschoolers.

Referring to the permanent need for institutional optimization, we point out the importance of a real decentralization in the education system that allows an objective internal evaluation, where the actors involved become co-participants in the entire improvement process. The assumption of new roles by teachers for preschool education determines their readaptation, the revision of internal tools and standards in order to optimize the results-resources ratio through the manifestation of personal and group initiative. In a context where the dynamics of current and prospective requirements are intense, the future institutional projection captures a manager who creates contexts for the natural manifestation of learning communities in an autonomous organizational culture that facilitates and encourages the presence of these practices.

As with any work done, in addition to the highlighted strengths, there are certain limitations that we are aware of: the direct intervention of the researcher on a small sample of subjects; conducting the investigative approach only at the level of kindergartens with legal personality in Cluj county; reduced time frame allocated to the research to influence its variables to a greater extent.

The topic addressed, the results obtained, but also the identified limits, allow us to project some perspectives that can create the following investigative approaches, based on this research: the expansion of the research at the level of all educational units with legal personality in Cluj county that have groups of preschoolers, and not only; carrying out a similar research at the national level involving all the units with legal personality that have groups of preschoolers, considering the major differences between the counties in terms of the number of kindergartens with legal personality; study on the motivation / reward of teachers for preschool education.

The research work, through the highlighted results, offers new perspectives on the correlation of the managerial internal control system and the quality assurance system. Standardization by means of documented procedures responds, equally, both in terms of quality and efficiency of the activities carried out at the level of the educational institution. An analysis on the perspective of the correlation of the two systems remains open. As public

entities and educational institutions, kindergartens refer to the external standards imposed by the two systems, although, internally, the evaluation/self-evaluation refers to a set of their own performance indicators. They respond to institutional needs and aim for progress at all levels of management. By their specificity, both systems highlight the significant role of internal evaluation for the progress of an organization.

We can consider the recalibration of the external standards starting from the way in which the internal managerial control components are correlated with the managerial functions, the same algorithm can also be taken over in the case of the correlation of the internal managerial control standards with the three areas of quality. Taking into account the specifics of educational organizations, we believe that a reassessment of the need to implement the internal managerial control system, within them, is absolutely necessary. The harmonization of the two systems, of quality and internal managerial control, within educational organizations, can determine the clarification of some aspects related to external evaluation, namely: the elimination of irrelevant documentation for the specifics of the institution, the assumption of clear, meaningful responsibilities for those involved. At the same time, by ensuring a specific and coherent system of external evaluation, the comparison of public entities becomes relevant in terms of differentiating educational organizations from other public institutions.

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