

Is it a Myth that the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) Promotes Continuous Improvement? A Diagnosis Approach

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ABSTRACT This study sought to investigate how IQMS contributes towards a culture of continuous improvement in schools. The qualitative study design uses semi-structured in-depth interviews in which educators from four purposively selected public schools from the East London Education District were interviewed. The interview schedule comprised eleven questions, focusing on aspects related to the implementation and functioning of IQMS. The findings suggest that the current conceptualization and practices within IQMS do not translate into the continuous improvement of quality in schools. It also transpired that not all educators are positive and enthusiastic about IQMS implementation. They are predominantly concerned about the lack of internal and external capacity to drive the process. The paper also reveals serious concerns about the effectiveness of IQMS as a tool towards the continuous improvement of quality in schools.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of quality and quality assurance is not new and there are different approaches to quality assurance. Although the meaning of quality assurance may vary depending on the field of activity, different institutions, in particular educational institutions, have evolved quality assurance models such as the Educational Quality Assurance Model and Total Quality Management (TQM). After 1994, teaching and learning in South Africa had to be reshaped through the constant and continuous process of evaluation in order to conform to current international quality assurance practices and systems and to address academic standards. In order to improve the education system, measures such as the Developmental and Appraisal System (DAS) 1999; and Whole School Evaluation (WSE) 2003 (Education Labour Relations Council 2003) were introduced. Nevertheless, the challenge to make a significant impact on the quality of learning attainment and education for the majority of South Africans remained elusive, as both DAS and WSE failed to realize this goal. Failure of these instruments forced the Department of Education to design a new system referred to as the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) which was formulated by the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC 2004). The IQMS embraces three integrated sys-

tems, namely, the Developmental Appraisal System (DAS), Whole School Evaluation (WSE) and Performance Management System (PMS). The policy further assumes that most teachers recognize the need for, and understand their responsibility to improve themselves professionally (Ministerial Committee Report 2009). Hence continuing professional development for teachers is located within the IQMS.

Thus, IQMS was implemented to improve the quality of education, however, according to De Clercq (2008) the educator component of the IQMS makes problematic assumptions about educator quality and improvement in South African schools. Queen-Mary and Mtapuri (2014) assert that teachers were uneasy about the IQMS and its implementation and concede that some teachers' morale seemed to be low as they felt that the IQMS did not meet their developmental expectations, as those who were supposed to develop them, did not seem to have the right answers.

It is against the above background that the study was encapsulated by means of the following objectives.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objective of this study was to gain an understanding as to whether IQMS promotes continuous improvement in schools. In

order to attain the specific objective of the study, the general objective was to determine how IQMS practices and promotes continuous improvement.

Having demarcated the objectives of the study, the literature review below provides a conceptual understanding of the different concepts in relation to quality assurance and the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) in particular.

Conceptual Understanding

Quality Assurance in the South African Context

The amalgamation of the different departments of education, including former homelands, into a single non-racial department of education resulted in a significant policy-making process. One of the major concerns of the newly established democratic government was to search for quality which has been one of the core motivating forces for restructuring the education system. Policy innovation to improve the delivery of quality education for all South African citizens was imperative. The criticism and breakdown of the inspectorate system in the majority of schools, steered the newly united Department of Education and teacher unions to initiate new ways of ensuring quality in schools. With the emphasis placed on raising standards in schools, policy innovations in the form of the Integrated Quality Assurance System (IQMS) were introduced. IQMS is informed by schedule 1 of the Employment of Educators Act (EEA) No 76 of 1998. In terms of resolution 8 of 2003 an agreement was reached in the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) to integrate programmes on quality management, which comprise the Developmental Appraisal System (DAS); the Performance Management System (PMS) and Whole School Evaluation (WSE). The IQMS as a quality initiative was formerly implemented in 2004.

The Purpose of IQMS

The principles of the IQMS are underpinned by the purpose of quality management systems, which determine competence, assess strength and areas for further development to ensure growth, to promote accountability and to moni-

tor the overall effectiveness of an institution (school).

The Developmental Appraisal System (DAS) appraises individual educators in a transparent manner with a view to determine areas of strength and weakness and to draw up programmes for individual development (Formative evaluation). The Performance Measurement System (PMS) is to evaluate individual teachers for salary progression, affirmation of appointments and rewards and incentives (Summative evaluation). The PMS essentially refers to managing poor performance and rewarding good performance in an open, fair and objective manner according to Hariparsad et al. (2008). Whole School Evaluation (WSE) evaluates the overall effectiveness of a school, including the support provided by the district, school management, infrastructure and learning resources, as well as the quality of teaching and learning (system evaluation). Furthermore, the process comprises different levels of evaluation, namely: internal appraisal (Process A) and external evaluations for WSE (Process B). Each process comprises a set of procedures to be followed.

Roles and Responsibilities of Individuals and Structures Involved in Implementing IQMS

Responsibilities for teacher evaluation through IQMS are typically shared between educational authorities, including district officials from the Department of Education, schools and their leadership, and teachers themselves.

The effective operation of teacher evaluation depends to a great extent on the way the concept and practice of school leadership is established in schools. The principal has the overall responsibility to ensure that the IQMS is implemented uniformly and effectively at school, whilst the school management team (SMT) and the staff development team (SDT) have the responsibility for advocacy and training of staff at school level. Apart from ensuring that all documentation sent to the district/local office is correct and delivered in time, they also play a prominent role in the internal moderation of evaluation results in order to ensure fairness and consistency.

Since teacher evaluation in the IQMS is based on self-evaluation and reviews by peers, this process is more typical of evaluation for improvement purposes. Teachers are therefore

responsible for identifying their own personal development support group (DSG). To achieve the greatest impact on improvement and development, teachers and their DSGs need to engage in regular feedback discussions. However, when peers are evaluators in accountability-driven teacher evaluation procedures, issues of legitimacy are particularly relevant to address (United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organisation 2007).

Education authorities play a major role in the conception and application of teacher evaluation, since they set the national learning outcome objectives, agreed standards for the teaching profession and the establishment of norms that regulate teacher evaluation. Thus, the roles of the district/local office (Department of Education) with regard to IQMS are briefly outlined as follows:

- ♦ The district/local office has the responsibility of advocacy, training and proper implementation of IQMS.
- ♦ The district/local office is responsible for the development and arrangement of professional development programmes in accordance with identified needs of educators and its own improvement plan.
- ♦ The district/circuit manager has the responsibility to moderate evaluation results of schools in his/her district/circuit in order to ensure consistency. In cases where the evaluation results of a school are inconsistent with the school's general level of performance or where the district/circuit manager has reason to believe that the evaluation at a particular school was either too strict or too lenient, he/she must refer the results back to the school for reconsideration.
- ♦ The district/local office must ensure that the evaluation results of schools are captured and processed in time to ensure successful implementation of salary grade progression.
- ♦ The district/local office should ensure that the implementation process in schools is monitored on an ongoing basis (ELRC 2003).

Constraints within IQMS Practices

According to Weber (2005), the adoption of the IQMS in 2003 was preceded by several years

of conflict between leading teachers organizations, the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) and the State. However, according to De Clercq (2008), the combination of appraisal for development and performance management with a common appraisal instrument like IQMS sends ambivalent messages to school staff who may be tempted to use the instrument for the sole purpose of rewards and not for development purposes. Biputh and McKenna (2011) support this view and assert that the overlap and distinct competing nature between Developmental Appraisal (DAS) and the Performance Measurement (PM) process was evident from the start. Gardner (2003) is of the opinion that the IQMS is trying to bring together three instruments which are morally and philosophically very different. He points out that Developmental Appraisal (DAS) is based on the philosophy of support and development, and also sees teachers as professionals, who are able to identify their developmental needs with the input of their peers. The Performance Measurement (PM) system on the other hand, is based on managerialism which does not acknowledge the ability of teachers to make their own developmental paths (Gardner 2003).

The practicality of combining Developmental Appraisal (DAS), Performance Measurement (PM) and Whole School Evaluation (WSE) has been questioned, as it is not feasible to identify needs, provide support, measure performance and evaluate the entire school, using the same instrument (De Clercq 2008). Weber (2005) states that the 'guiding principles' that inform the alignment between Developmental Appraisal (DAS), Performance Measurement (PM) and Whole School Evaluation (WSE) highlight a central theme that runs through the IQMS system. This according to Weber (2005) is the tension between holding teachers and schools to account through checking on them and 'measuring' their 'performance' and a commitment to developing human capacity and skills where required. Based on this critique, Biputh and McKenna (2011) are of the opinion that the entire process is a strategy to ensure compliance to departmental regulations and requirements under the guise of being a developmental exercise.

Marneweck (2007) argues that the design of the IQMS is problematic as the language used within the instrument is ambiguous, rendering its design unclear and incomplete. Marneweck

(2007) also highlights challenges associated with the technical requirements and rating system of the IQMS that can lead to confusion. Biputh and McKenna (2011) concur with this view and concede that confusion exists about the IQMS as a supportive form of professional development, or as a device for assessing educator competence, rewarding the effective and dismissing the ineffective. According to De Clercq (2008), an important condition for effective developmental appraisal is that performance standards should be contextual and negotiated with educators. It is in this regard that Guest (2008) asserts that this powerful tool to measure teachers' performance was designed outside the school to be implemented in the school by people who had little say in its design, using minimal input via teacher unions. It is in this sense that Grobler (2006) states that a performance measurement instrument like the IQMS was designed in 'heaven' but needs to be implemented 'on earth.'

SADTU (2003) claims that Whole School Evaluation (WSE) is punitive rather than supportive and developmental. According to Jansen (2004), WSE involves the whole school in the evaluation process, but excludes the staff when a final judgment on the school's performance is made. Jansen (2004) concludes and points out that although on the surface the WSE policy seems to empower teachers and emphasizes teacher development, it is still a bureaucratic control mechanism.

De Clercq (2008) summarizes other problematic aspects which could possibly inhibit the effectiveness and efficiency of the IQMS as a developmental instrument for quality education as follows:

- ♦ Risks associated with external evaluators which include the likely rigidity of standardized instruments and procedures, which may not be appropriate for all schools in their differing contexts; one of the assumptions underpinning the IQMS states that all schools can be evaluated using the same instrument, standards, criteria and processes. The different conditions and circumstances in schools could therefore render the IQMS effective and efficient in some schools, but ineffective in others. Well-performing, functioning schools are therefore better equipped to manage and mediate these IQMS expectations in an effective,

efficient and productive way, with the IQMS process also contributing to the improvement and development of educators' performance; however in low-functioning schools, the IQMS process is seen as cumbersome, time-consuming and a fruitless exercise;

- ♦ The unsatisfactory professional qualifications of many educators, as well their mastery of subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge makes it somehow paradoxical to monitor peer performance for improvement of the school, and to act as mentors and development support groups (DSGs) as required by the principles underpinning the IQMS.

Marneweck (2007) suggests other challenges associated with the effective implementation of the IQMS, which include the following:

- ♦ The lack of human capacity required to implement the IQMS at all levels which include the National Department of Education, various administrative levels at provinces and districts, to the level of individual schools;
- ♦ The training for the IQMS is not ongoing and quality assured, but once-off, based on a cascade model; and
- ♦ The quality of the IQMS results is problematic, as documents are often incomplete or inadequately filled out, resulting in neither valid nor reliable data obtainable that can lead to the improvement and development of schools.

According to Zelvys (1999), the system of quality assurance in education has not undergone significant changes, as the previous institution of school inspection, whose main function was evaluation of work of schools with regard to conditions, processes and objectives defined by national curriculum and legal regulations, mainly remained unchanged.

METHODOLOGY

The study reported here is qualitative in nature and its major objective was to explore whether IQMS promotes continuous improvement in schools. Babbie (2013) states that qualitative research enables researchers to study human action from an insider's perspective. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to gather information and to provide an overview of educators' perceptions on the use of IQMS as a tool

to promote continuous improvement in schools. The data presented in this study are derived from a case study design undertaken in four primary schools in the East London Education District in the Eastern Cape Province.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select information-rich cases that can provide more insights about the topic (Neuman 2006). For this reason, four primary schools in the East London Education District were selected to provide a range of schools that were representative of urban and township schools in the pre-1994 departments of education (Department of Education and Training, House of Representatives and Cape Provincial Department of Education). In each school the principal, one member of the school management team (SMT) and one post level one teacher were individually involved in the interviews. The principal of each school was selected because of his/her leadership role as the 'driver' of quality assurance and school improvement, whilst one member of the School Management Team (SMT) was selected on the basis of their overall responsibility in overseeing quality assurance practices and procedures. The choice of teachers was based on the understanding of his/her personal performance and professional accountability to ensure and maintain quality teaching and learning.

Data Collection

Permission to visit schools and to conduct the study was sought from the relevant authorities. All ethical considerations appropriate to this study, such as confidentiality and right to privacy were observed. All participants were also requested to sign an informed consent form. The study employed semi-structured interviews to elicit responses on the continuous improvement practices within IQMS and to establish whether IQMS promotes continuous improvement in schools.

Participants were requested to listen to the playback of the audiotape, allowing them to comment on the accuracy of their comments. This means that the study adhered to criteria of trustworthiness such as truth-value and applicability (Leedy and Ormrod 2010).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using a thematic approach. The transcribed data comprised a verbatim account without premature reduction of the text. According to Stirling (2001), the analytic steps can be split into three broad stages: (a) the reduction or breakdown of the text; (b) the exploration of the text; and (c) the integration of exploration. During the data analysis process the researcher immersed himself in the data and carefully examined the contents of the interviews in order to allow themes to emerge. In arranging the themes, the researcher took themes derived from the text and assembled them into similar coherent groupings, comprising themes about IQMS practices. The contents within each theme were analyzed to establish emerging patterns of information as well as differences and contrasting points.

RESULTS

Practices that Drive the Process of Continuous Improvement

The findings from the study are organized in terms of the practices that drive the process of continuous improvement.

Lack of Internal Capacity

What surfaced quite predominantly under this theme was the cynicism and lack of enthusiasm influencing a large number of participants regarding the implementation of IQMS. A predominant concern that transpired was the work overload in terms of administration brought about by IQMS implementation, which participants see as obligatory rather than something to assist them or to contribute towards their development and that of the school.

The following are examples of how participants made reference to time constraints, work overload and lack of manpower as factors that impact negatively on the improvement aspects of educators and schools. Head of Department 2 said:

Visiting classes is very time-consuming. The same HoD can be chosen by sometimes up to four teachers, meaning that he/she will have to leave his/her own class. Teachers who are part of the Developmental Support Group also have

their own classes. As HoD I am for instance responsible for all foundation phase teachers which is also a lot of paperwork.

It is against this background that IQMS can be viewed as a procedure to which participants attach very little significance and therefore lack internal capacity to wholeheartedly engage in it and sanction it as a culture for continuous improvement, aimed at enhancing the development of quality.

Dependence on External Control

As the researcher has argued earlier, sustaining a culture of continuous improvement, requires participatory efforts from all stakeholders within the school and the encouragement of quality awareness at various levels. Thus, such an approach may stand in contrast to management concepts within IQMS, as it motivates for a stakeholder-oriented strategy as opposed to a management-driven strategy.

The weakness of the current external quality assurance system, is that officials from the Department of Education in particular, and officials from local/district offices fail to support schools; instead they merely collect forms for compliance purposes, thus, validating this claim. Educators' views are encapsulated in the following excerpts:

Principal 4: No support as officials from the Department of Education hardly visit the school to discuss scores or aspects of development, Education Development Officers fulfil the roles of messengers or are occupied with other functions for which they have not been appointed or are convening meetings.

Teacher 4: Communication with the Department of Education (DoE) is problematic, there is no teamwork with the DoE on how to improve quality schools, also there is no training on supervision and how to implement IQMS properly.

Collecting forms without checking the claims made in them, alludes more to 'quality management' instead of improving teaching and learning and contributing towards a culture of continuous quality improvement in schools.

Lack of External Capacity

A prime challenge identified was the lack of external capacity in relation to IQMS practices

amongst officials from the Department of Education, more so with Education Development Officers (EDO's). The following extracts are examples of how participants make reference to the lack of capacity amongst Education Development Officers (EDO's) to fulfill their functions.

Senior Teacher 2: I have been to a workshop in 2010, we were all sleeping there. No one actually heard what was said, we were all sleeping, only thing that was done, was reading from the screen. They don't have their own programmes of action to guide schools.

Teacher 2: When they enter the school, they are always in a rush. Everything is haphazard on the side of the DoE. There are no demonstrations, only theory, yes, they need to be work shopped themselves.

Bias in the Evaluation Process

The lack of fairness in the evaluation process manifests itself in acts of favouritism, bias, and inconsistent application of assessment criteria during internal appraisals and evaluations. Peer reviews, which are prone to manipulation are further accentuated by educators receiving inflated and unrealistic scores, which are not true reflections of their performance, but merely used for pay progression, subsequently undermine the spirit and purpose of development and continuous improvement. The malpractices in which peers overrate their colleagues militates against the principles and objectives of IQMS, hampering the developmental aspects thereof.

The following extracts are examples of how participants made references to the IQMS scoring and rating scales, which according to them are the main source of biasness, favouritism and dishonesty during the evaluation process.

Teacher 3: Since we have started with IQMS, I feel it is the biggest farce that they have introduced, because some teachers that I know, they don't work, but yet they give themselves high scores. I know that some of the teachers who don't perhaps do sport at school, but yet they score themselves a 4 and those who do sport also get exactly the same mark. I feel this is a very unfair system, absolutely. And some teachers do not even prepare lessons, but yet they score themselves a 4. They are not truthful when it comes to scoring and are really dishonest.

Senior teacher 1: People always choose somebody who is going to ... who knows that ... okay

I will choose my friend who, if I give her a 4, she will also give me a 4 when she is evaluating me, so I will take my friend. Yes the scoring is very-problematic, because you are not honest towards yourself and the other teacher.

The malpractices in which peers overrate their colleagues militates against the principles and objectives of IQMS, hampering the developmental aspects.

Focus on Incentives Rather Than Quality

Evidence in this section revealed that the incorporation of incentives alters the focus from development to pay progression, which inevitably leads to participants' involvement in IQMS practices as a self-centred activity, in the sense that their main motives are on salary progression and rewards, as opposed to development. This is exhibited in the affirmations of the following educators:

Deputy Principal 1: *The negative thing about IQMS is that maybe a teacher will just perform in order to get money. That's the negative part of IQMS.*

ST 1: *If you go to each and every teacher here and anywhere, the first thing you say IQMS to the teacher, and ask them to say something that comes to mind, the teacher will say money. Nobody will say IQMS – development.*

The sole purpose of educators is therefore not to enhance the quality of education per se, but rather for self-interest and financial gain.

DISCUSSION

Lack of Internal Capacity

Within this framework, IQMS is viewed as an official policy that has impacted participants' workloads, resulting in nothing more than compliance with official procedures; having a contrary effect from the one intended, that is, as a tool for continuous improvement. In other circumstances a formal definition of quality might be expressed in terms of 'value for money'; however, quality in relation to IQMS appears to be equated with a 'burden', as an 'added on', or as part of a compliance culture.

Dependence on External Control

The management culture embedded in IQMS finds expression in an external quality assurance

exercise which introduces a new bureaucracy and increased centralized management controls. The study has therefore found that IQMS leads to a dramaturgical compliance to the requirements of the bureaucratic system, instead of quality improvement. Continuous monitoring by a controlling agency requiring 'overly bureaucratic procedures' results in detailed paper trails, but entirely stifles development and innovation, leading to a continuous proceduralising tendency and loss of academic autonomy (Harvey 2002). It would therefore seem that external quality assurance, despite its supposedly noble intentions, strengthens the hand of central management by demanding accountability and ensuring alignment and loyalty to the management determined vision, mission and goals.

Lack of External Capacity

It would seem that not all officials are capable and capacitated to support educators and schools, subsequently resulting in their inability and unwillingness to address developmental aspects within schools, as well as concerns and uncertainties in relation to IQMS implementation. This claim is supported by Queen-Mary and Mtapuri (2014), when they state that teachers' morale seemed to be low and that some teachers felt that IQMS did not meet their developmental expectations, as even those who were supposed to develop them, did not have the right answers.

Bias in the Evaluation Process

What is disturbing about the above is that the spirit of performance appraisal is lost in the scramble for 'best' scores and pursuit of camaraderie. Here it can be seen that the system is being seriously undermined instead of being guided in the selection of appraisers based on professional competency to appraise; a friend will be chosen instead. This seems to suggest that scoring in IQMS can be regarded as a major weakness of quality evaluation in many schools.

These perspectives are in corroboration with Grant and Singh's (2011) line of reasoning that many people will cross ethical boundaries to earn rewards, often choosing the shortest, easiest path, convincing themselves that the ends justify the means.

Focus on Incentives Rather Than Quality

The initiation of a monetary incentive is viewed as a serious drawback that inevitably creates resentment amongst participants. When IQMS is viewed in this light, the improvement aspect is further undermined, as it creates a culture of self-interest for financial reward which takes precedence over development and improvement.

The direct link to funding also serves as an incitation to hide weaknesses, manipulate data and the creation of a compliance culture according to Kis (2005). The implication of a quality assurance system that is being driven by rewards does not only reduce internal motivation, but the drive for monetary rewards completely subsumes the developmental agenda of IQMS. When a quality assurance system is viewed through this perspective, it leads to a lack of intrinsic enthusiasm and impetus for the process, which further negates the improvement and empowering capacity of the instrument.

Grant and Singh's critique (2011) has been proven right in this study when they say that when strong financial incentives are in place, internal motivation will be reduced, as many employees will be performing their duties to receive compensation. Some of the views also correspond with that of Fritz-Gibbon (1996) who asserts that performance related pay is a waste of public money as employees still lack intrinsic enthusiasm and impetus for the process. According to Vroeijerstijn (1995), the direct link to funding is a threat to quality assurance, because every assessment loses its value for improvement. Harvey (2002) believes educators are smart people: so they will find all ways to beat the system and by doing so try to get the money. In other words, a quality assurance system which threatens withdrawal of funding for underperformance, incites educators to hide weaknesses rather than engage in self-review for quality improvement.

The study revealed that in spite all the good intentions of the Department of Education to provide a tool for quality management in schools, there is a breakdown insofar as continuous improvement and development is concerned.

CONCLUSION

Offering a diagnosis approach in this study allowed the researcher to think backwards from the outcome to the cause. It can therefore be

concluded that the current conceptualization and practices of IQMS do not translate into continuous quality improvement in schools. Given the centrality of IQMS as a tool to improve the quality of teaching and learning, the overall impression is that educators in the selected schools lack the capability to improve teaching and learning. This can mainly be attributed to the way in which IQMS practices are implemented, which focuses more on compliance, at the expense of the professional development of educators. Much higher quality can only be achieved with a stronger focus on development, as opposed to the use of IQMS for self-centred purposes, which undermine continuous improvement of quality. While arguments in this paper may be given less status by those who advocate and implemented IQMS, arguments in this study raise serious concerns about the effectiveness and efficiency of IQMS as a tool to continually enhance the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the findings of the study, it is suggested that educators and departmental officials should be empowered with the requisite information and knowledge in the use of IQMS. Given the fact that quality assurance remains an inevitable feature in schools, it is important that the three policies coexist within IQMS, instead of being implemented and used as fragmented programmes for self-interest, that cause tension between personal needs and improvement needs of educators. It is also recommended that for the purpose of continuous quality improvement and management, there should be a balance between professional development of educators and managerial imperatives that demand compliance and accountability.

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