

## QUALITY OF THE EDUCATIONAL SERVICE –PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE TEACHERS IN HIGH SCHOOLS FROM SUCEAVA COUNTY, ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** The goal of this study was to determine the main variables that are part of the management strategies for quality assurance in higher education. The study was conducted in 2016 on a representative sample of secondary schools in Suceava County, Romania. The research methodology has mixed quantitative analysis of collected data using a questionnaire applied to teachers from seven schools in the Suceava County (268 respondents) and qualitative analysis of public documents referring to performances in the secondary education system. To achieve the questionnaire, an adaptation of the SERVQUAL method was used, specific for the services domain. It was aimed at establishing the differences between perceptions and expectations of teachers on human and material resources necessary to ensure the quality of services in education. The results were correlated with data on students' performances in high school and / or professional school.

Changing the mentality of the teachers, self-assessment and objective assessment of the work performed and working conditions can lead to increased quality of educational services with direct effects in improving school performance of direct beneficiaries of education, the students.

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### Introduction

In education, compared to the industrial or economic sectors, main studies on the concept of scientific management are just at the beginning, both in theory and especially in practice. Advanced economies, in Europe and worldwide, have proven increased interest in this direction, studies on the management of the education system existing since 1980. In Romania, the scientific approach to the educational management affirms since the 1990s, namely after the 1989 revolution that led to the change of the political regime. A representative definition is the one given by Toca (2008) who considers that management education is consisting in "studying the processes and relationships that manifest within educational institutions during the educational process, in order to discover the laws that generate the educational management and to develop management methods and techniques based on them, which are done to ensure increases deficiency of this process". In another work, targeting the quality management in a school organization, the same author states that "Education quality management should focus on processes and not on people" quality being both the "responsibility of the supplier and of the recipient; a mental attitude, a way of life of each and of all vocational schools" (Toca, 2010).

The research performed in this study was based on the interest of identifying specific variables of educational management and of quality management in high schools and/or vocational schools in Romania, given the particularities of systemic, social, economic and educational nature which the education system in this country is confronted with.

### Research Methodology

The purpose of this research was a quantitative analysis, through the use of a questionnaire, of perceptions and expectations of teachers from 7 secondary and vocational type of schools, in Suceava County, regarding the available resources needed to provide quality educational services.

The research problem materialized in determining the main variables that are part of management strategies for quality assurance in the pre-university education in Romania. Quantitative analysis of data obtained by the questionnaire was completed by qualitative analysis conducted previously on the basis of reports and documents specific to the educational field, regarding the results obtained at a baccalaureate level by the graduates from high school but also on the school dropout rate at pre-university secondary education.

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## **Objectives and hypothesis of the research**

The overall objective of the research was to identify the strategic components needed for the management of secondary schools/technical-vocational schools in Romania in order to obtain optimum operation and performance across the organization.

The general hypothesis of the research says that in the SERVQUAL version there is enough information to perform a quantitative analysis of educational services from the perspective of service providers (teachers) who expressed their expectations and perceptions with respect to important characteristics of strategic and operational management from the school organization.

The study was based on several objectives and specific assumptions that are mentioned below.

Specific Objective 1 of the Research: carrying out the questionnaire's items from the perspective of compatibility with the SERVQUAL characteristics and attributes: tangible elements, reliability, responsiveness, trust, empathy.

Hypothesis 1: The items in the questionnaire express characteristics and attributes of the five dimensions indicating the quality of a school organization: tangible elements, reliability, responsiveness, trust, empathy.

Specific Objective 2 of the Research: Identification of the main variables underlying the development of management strategies for quality assurance in pre-university education, in high school / vocational school in Suceava County.

Hypothesis 2: The questionnaire in the SERVQUAL version highlights in a large extent, the main variables needed to establish management strategies for quality assurance in pre-university education in high school / vocational school in Suceava County.

## **Literature review**

In the context of socio-economic life, along with many other services addressing individuals to meet the needs, "educational services" are characterized by a number of characteristics that describe the specific of the activities in this sector. In Romania education is an administrative public service type performed at the national level, being provided to the whole community both by public and private institutions (Androniceanu, 1999). In specialized literature (Chitu, Ioana Bianca, Brătuțu Gabriel Ispas, Ana, op.cit., P.10-11, Gafencu Zait, Adriana (1996), Ionciță, Maria, Op. Cit, p.17, apud (Bedrule-Grigoruta, 2007)) common features were identified for all categories of services.

In this context, this study shows an alternative to assess the quality of education by adopting a representative method for measuring and assessing the quality of public service, the SERVQUAL method. The method was improved from its first presentation in 1988 right by its creators (Parasuram, 1988) and adapted to the specificities of the analyzed public services. The SERVQUAL method is used to determine the difference between the perceptions and expectations of a service beneficiary, in this case it is about the educational service. This method allows not only the evaluation of its services but also identifying the areas for improvement by comparing the activity that can be achieved with other organizations in the sector (Amia, 2011). Regardless of the public service performed, the recipient's perception regarding the quality of the products that are more important as the "perceived quality is not the same with objective quality" (Zeithaml, 1987). In a school organization teachers who work are the interface between the direct beneficiaries (students), the indirect ones (parents, community) and the provider of educational services, namely a school unit represented by the bodies of their leadership: the teachers' board of directors and the school managers.

A measurement of the difference between teacher's perceptions and expectations regarding the quality of educational services is a first step to identify strategic issues that will improve the quality of educational services. "The objective quality" is difficult to describe in terms of educational services in Romania because there are insufficient performance indicators and the existing ones are not clearly and concisely formulated and are irrelevant to the education system as a whole (Pintilie, 2016).

In the initial version of the SERVQUAL method, the authors identified five categories by which the 10 dimensions of quality public service are described, each with different weights in determining the size of the quality of that service: tangible elements (11%), reliability (32%), responsiveness (22%), trust (19%), empathy (16%) (Badulescu, 2008). The main goal of a strategy is to ensure the competitive advantage for the organization where it is implemented.

Developing the strategy is based on a careful analysis of the quality of the delivered product or service but also on physical resources, material and human resources which are used and which interact with the organization to achieve its objectives. The five dimensions of quality, proposed by the SERVQUAL method are present in all self-assessments and assessments that are targeting the quality produced by an organization, implicitly by a school organization, even if the mentioned shares are different in relation to the original model.

"Quality is the degree of excellence achieved and the control of variables in achieving this excellence in fulfilling consumer desires" (Zeithaml, 1990 apud (Steward)). The SERVQUAL method combines all the elements in the construction of a strategy: resources, objectives, needs to be addressed by the targeted public service, and the main purpose being to improve its quality.

The following table shows the quality grid in the SERVQUAL version.

Table 1: The quality grid in the SERVQUAL version	
The difference between expectations and perceptions	Service Quality
Negative values	Better service than was expected
Positive values	Service quality weaker than was expected

Source: Parasuranam (1988)

The Parasuranam's model (Parasuranam, 1988), refers to the relationship between consumers and service providers through assessing this relationship in terms of perceived quality of service recipients compared with their expectations. In this study, the teachers who work in the system were placed in the role of beneficiaries while the service provider role was taken over by the management team as well as by the managers responsible for the good development and for the quality of educational services provided by the school organization.

In education which is a public system, the intervention of managers in terms of financial rewards is limited (employee remuneration is determined centrally by specific legislation). The manager can provide support only to sustain the employee in obtaining allowances expressed as a percentage from the base salary (tutoring, gradation of merit, Ph.D., occasional awards offered by the community).

In this research, targeting pre-university education, the SERVQUAL version was adapted by collecting perceptions and expectations of teachers regarding financial, material and human resources that are needed in the education system to optimize results. Identification of the share of these resources is the premise of establishing the management strategy that can provide competitive advantage of a school organization according to the specifics of that organization. Providing resources is the task of the manager who can guide the organization's strategy for meeting the needs expressed by teachers in the organization.

**Research Variables**

In this study have been highlighted variables that represent characteristics of educational services of a school unit. They are: endowment for theoretical and practical training, attractively presented curriculum and adequate training of students, alternative methods of training and personal development activities, student centred activities, school management improving, activities to improve quality of educational services, transparency in communication and decisions, professionalism of teacher's motivation, effective marketing, valuing teachers, and situational / participative leadership.

**Methods used for research**

The method used to collect and interpret data is an adaptation of the SERVQUAL method given the usefulness of carrying out a quantitative analysis in this study. For the educational field the gap between perceived quality and objective quality is given by the typology of the interviewed: manager, teacher, parent, student. But, as Zeithaml (1987) said: "The perceived quality is not the equivalent of the objective quality."

The perceived quality cannot be measured by highly accurate technical or physical standards, it is rather an assessment or judgment of a product formed from both the intrinsic attributes (e.g. physical) and extrinsic attributes (ex. price, brand name) that are not part of the physical product (Zeithaml, 1987). In the case of the resulting product of the education system the "perceived quality" is subjectively influenced by the ability of direct and indirect beneficiaries of self-assessment, namely to assess. The intrinsic characteristics are important only for vocational schools (e.g. Sports schools, military, etc.) instead the extrinsic characteristics are of another nature than the products of the industrial and economic fields. In this context, rather elusive of always changing educational policy, in expressing objectivity it is difficult to quantify quality even using a recording device such as quantitative questionnaire. The SERVQUAL version records not only perceptions regarding quality but also the expectations and in these circumstances objectivity in the assessment if it is necessary if completing the questionnaire is done responsibly and carefully. The SERVQUAL original version (1994-1995) set ten dimensions of service quality, subsequently grouped into five categories: tangible elements, reliability, responsiveness, trust, empathy (Badulescu, 2008). For this research, an adaptation of the original five categories of the SERVQUAL model was used. The data required for testing and the confirmation of the made assumptions were collected from high schools and vocational schools from Suceava County.

**Sampling**

The study was conducted during June - August 2016 and was based on statistics provided by the School Inspectorate of Suceava County, for the school year 2015-2016. 44 high schools and / or professional schools were registered in Suceava County. The total number of students enrolled in these educational institutions was 22,064 students, of which 12,565 (56.94%) are enrolled with a theoretical profile, remaining 9,499 (43.05%) registered in vocational and technical education. There were recorded 2,150 teachers of whom 1,496 (69%) women (Source: NIS public information email data 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2016).

The stratified sampling option was used because the distribution of pre-specified characteristics of the sample is similar to that found in the population. The purpose of this stratification was to provide a representation as high as can be, given the homogeneity of subsets but also the heterogeneity of them (Babbie, 2010). Three layers which conform to the internal homogeneity criterion as well as to lack of homogeneity in relation to other layers have been selected: 1. School Unit profile: theoretical, technological, mixed; 2. Framing in the physical geographical map of Suceava County; 3. baccalaureate exam results, July 2016. Setting the sample, in relation to the total community at the level of the Suceava county, it was carried out in a first stage, taking into account the sampling criteria. The following table provides representative data for this situation.

Table 2: The share of high schools in Suceava county relative to the school profile			
School Unit Type	Number of School Units	Share	Number of School Units selected for the sample
Theoretical high school	14	31.8%	2
Technological high school/professional school	14	31.8%	2
Mixed high school	16	36.4%	3
School Units Total:	44	15%	Total units in the sample: 7

Source: Author

In order to respect the geographical criterion in the selection of the sample we considered the widest geographic coverage area by selecting high schools that would be in different places in the county. Unfortunately, the receptivity of some of the school's directors was very low which prevented us to perform the survey in the initial version.

Another aspect in order to ensure the best possible representativeness of the sample selected was linked to results obtained at a baccalaureate exam in July 2016, given the need to start the research as soon as possible. The following table includes statistics that describe the situation of these high schools, in terms of results from the baccalaureate exam.

Table 3: The Results of the baccalaureate exam session June-July 2016, for the sampled schools

Nr.crt.	Town	High school type	Graduation rate
1.	Campulung Moldovenesc	Technological	73%
2.	Dolhasca	mixed	44%
3.	Falticeni	mixed	52%
4.	Falticeni	mixed	63%
5.	Suceava	theoretical	99%
6.	Suceava	mixed	87%
7.	Vatra Dornei	theoretical	71%

Source: Author

The sample size for teachers in those schools, given that 57% of high school students were enrolled in a theoretical profile, the remaining 43% being enrolled in secondary education and / or vocational education, revealed  $n = 313$  questionnaires to be applied.

### Results and Interpretations

A first result of this study is the questionnaire designed in a way that adapts a model used in public services, SERVQUAL, to the public education service. In the following table are mentioned the similarities and differences between the two types of questionnaires.

Table 4: ServQual version adapted for educational services

Classic ServQual version	ServQual research version adapted	Motivation for the modification
22 questions for each section addressed to the "expectations" and the other to the "perceptions" of service quality	26 questions addressing the same questions as in the classic version	-complexity of specific activities of service education -big number of education stakeholders, -heterogeneity of direct and indirect beneficiaries.
The respondents are beneficiaries of public service	The respondents are teachers who work in the school, at a level of high schools / vocational schools	the need to consider teachers not only as "educational service providers" but also "indirect beneficiaries" of educational services
Five categories with different shares to characterize public service: - Tangible elements: 11% -Reliability: 32% -Responsiveness: 22% -Assurance: 19% - Empathy: 16%	Five categories to characterize educational service with shares other than the specific version of the classic SERVQUAL: - Tangible elements: 23% - Reliability: 27% - Responsiveness: 15% - Assurance: 23% - Empathy: 12%	- This survey collects data on how teachers relate to the quality of the educational services so we kept the five categories of SERVQUAL, the classic version, - the specific of the activities in the field of education determined me to change my share of questions characterizing the five SERVQUAL categories, the focus being placed on tangible elements, namely human and material resources in the school organization.

Source: Author

The questionnaire was applied in 7 schools, from which 2 of which were theoretic high schools, one a technological high school and 4 mixed (with both profiles). Were distributed 333 questionnaires, 290 questionnaires were successfully collected. Out of these, 268 were correctly filled out with the rest being canceled (double or partially completed responses).

The questionnaire was structured in two parts. In the first part collected socio-demographic data was collected concerning the age in the educational activity, the level of professional qualification and academic degree of the participants. In this regard there were high percentages of respondents corresponding to full time job (85%), qualified (99%) and seniority more than 20 years (42%) in the education system, so with training and appropriate professional experience job.

Thus, we can say that the views expressed in the questionnaire reflects an objective position on the quality of educational services, regarding the quality standards of the sampled schools and is less influenced by the specific subjectivity of any investigation.

The second part of the questionnaire was structured as two sets of identical questions (26) aiming to record responses, first in terms of "perceptions," then in terms of "expectations" that teachers have on the resources necessary to ensure educational quality of the school organization which they belong.

A Likert scale was chosen for assessing the responses, five values corresponding to the numbers: 1 (very little), 2 (to a lesser extent), 3 (neutral, neither large nor small), 4 (a large extent), 5 (in very large extent). On this scale, the recorded answers, regardless of the set of questions "perceptions" or "expectations" were placed in the numerical values 4 and 5. The diagram below shows these results.

Recorded data shows that, for each item, the percentage of responses for the "expectations" is greater than the responses for the "perceptions," the difference between them having positive values that indicates a weaker qualitative service than expected, according to the SERVQUAL model.

However, these differences are up 10% so it can be considered that, in terms of service quality in high schools and / or professional schools from the study area, are provided the human and material resources enabling the development of a quality education process very closed to real standards.

Since the point of views of the teachers highlights this aspect, in the study an indicator was watched for showing quality "products," these are students leaving the secondary education system. From this point of view there appear to be discrepancies reported by both school attendance but also on the results of the national baccalaureate exam. For the Suceava County School Inspectorate, a decrease of the dropout rate, from 0.34% in the 2014-2015 school year to 0.27% in the 2015-2016 school year was found out. Among the 324 students who quit school courses in the 2015-2016 school year, 94 were those from classes IX-XII (Diaconu, 2017).

Regarding the performance of high school students at the baccalaureate exam session June-July 2016, the percentage of registered graduate of Suceava County on this exam was 71.19%. This percentage, however, is not conclusive because, in parallel, a more serious problem currently facing secondary education system is the non-inclusion and / or absenteeism from this exam.

According to statistics from Bursa Online, only 71.23% of classes XII and XIII who graduated in 2015-2016, were enrolled for the baccalaureate exam in 2016. Thus, the problem of school activities centered on the individual student progress is a current one, which must fall within the concerns of future managers aiming at institutional development, obtaining competitive advantage and ensuring quality education.

After applying the questionnaire and result interpretation, we selected those variables, characteristic of the quality dimensions that are basic elements of management strategies specific to an educational institution: endowment for theoretical and practical, curriculum attractively presented and adequate training of students, alternative methods of training and personal development activities, student centred activities, school management improvement activities, quality of education improvement, transparency in communication and decisions, professionalism of teachers, teacher motivation, effective marketing, valorisation of teaching staff, and situational/participative leadership.

### **Research limits**

The study has shown the reluctance of teaching staff relatively to the carrying out of a study that aims to identify management strategies for quality assurance in Pre-university School. In some schools, even the unit manager restricted the access, in other schools, teachers have expressed disinterest to participate in such a study. Moreover, the superficiality with which some teachers have read the introductory part of the questionnaire, where the requirements and the manner of filling in were presented, maybe specified. This has resulted in a series of questionnaires which were canceled either because they had double answers, or because they had unanswered items.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, taking into consideration the very high percentages corresponding to full time respondents qualified and with over 15 years of experience in the education system, it can be stated that with appropriate job training and professional experience, the opinions expressed in the survey reflects an objective position on quality of educational services, related to the quality standards of the sampled schools and which is less influenced by the specific subjectivity of any investigation. The first research hypothesis was made in connection with the structure of the questionnaire. The large number of respondents who selected "a large extent" and "a very large extent" on the Likert scale with five values, confirms the first hypothesis outlined in this study. The second research hypothesis, concerning the selection of the SERVQUAL version as an optimal method for collecting the data needed for the study was partially confirmed during this investigation. Through the questionnaire applied in the adapted version were highlighted additional variables that characterize the processes undertaken in a school organization. All the variables included in this study were selected as "important" or "very important" to be part of a management strategy for the quality assurance in pre-university education. At the same time, the differences with the positive values between teachers' expectations and perceptions have shown a lower quality of educational services than the desired one, so a need to improve these services was perceived. By using an interview guide with the managers of the school units in the sample, the quantitative analysis of the variables in this study will be carried out in the future. Thus, the main variables to be included in the management strategies aimed at ensuring the quality of the educational services in the high schools in Suceava County will be identified.

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