

MANAGEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN SERBIA – STANDARD APPROACH, OLD HABITS AND NEW CHALLENGES

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss several different aspects or different fields of expertise that any manager of educational institution in Serbia must have, in order to be successful as a manager. We analyze: (1) formal aspect of licencing process for school principals, (2) aspect of law, bylaws and regulations, (3) political and society aspect, (4) medical aspect as a consequence of COVID19 crisis and also (5) aspect of implementation of new educational technologies and digitalization in educational process. Special attention is given on a new challenges in management, that arises during COVID19 crisis. An interesting research was implemented with principals of schools, preschool institutions and other educational institutions, regarding all those aspects. 264 principals participated in this research. In this paper we presented obtained results, we analyze them and also we give some conclusions.

Keywords: Management, Education, Digitalization, Covid19

1. Introduction

Leadership is a way of directing the behavior of gathered people in order to achieve a certain goal by effectively using available resources (Ward, 2020). Management is a special scientific discipline, practically multidisciplinary, dealing with the problems of management of jobs, processes and systems (Bush, 2008). This discipline studies management as a complex process, with a series of sub-processes. On the other hand, this discipline deals with a group of people who manage processes and study all individual management problems and phenomena related to the efficient execution of certain tasks (Pedler et al., 2005).

Each of us plans our daily activities almost every day and organizes all available resources that are necessary for the realization of planned daily activities. There is almost no family in which certain activities are not delegated to individual members of the household in the morning, with the necessary stimulus for the activities to be realized. Individuals are usually unaware of this, but it is a typical daily routine that includes several basic management functions.

Similarly, on the other hand, some other systems (for example, educational) or institutions such as educational institutions (kindergartens, schools, faculties) too, are under the constant influence of the environment. In order for the system to continue to function and fulfill the purpose of its existence, coordinated and well-planned management activities are necessary. (Longshore, 2019)

Theories dealing with the study of management, both in the world and in the domestic literature, list five basic functions of the management process: planning, organizing, delegating, leading and controlling (Bush et al., 2019; Ashkanasy et al., 2000). Over time, management methods have constantly changed and adapted to the newly created emerging

socio-economic relations, but the essence of everyday management functions has always remained the same. All five management functions are interdependent and interconnected. Each of these five functions is an indispensable part of the management process in the business system. Accordingly, the the implementation of any of the functions can give full effect only if the other functions are realized in the required way.

2. Management in education

In the previous period, a few decades ago, the role of the school principal or the preschool director was, very important in the local society. Very important, but only in educational mean and in educational field. School principal had to be respectable teacher and educational professional, well known in his/her field of expertise. He/she had to deal with teaching process, teachers, students, parents and quality of education in its own school (Abdikadir, 2013). But principal did not have a need for some additional education, additional skills. He/she did not have to be principal and, at the same time, expert in law and economy. He/she did not have to be seriously involved in political processes in local municipality. He/she did not have a need to struggle for money for school, everything was well settled down and arranged by state and by the municipality (Ballou et al., 1995). Additionally, there were no fast and big changes in education like, for example, a leap into digitalization. What happened and what changed in last 10 years? Education changed¹.

Principals have had standard approach in their work and, of course, some old habits. But now, they have to accept new challenges.

There were a lot of different influences and aspects, that affects school principal job and role. We will consider some aspects, for this role in Serbian educational system, right now, in this specific moment. In particular, we will discuss: licensing for school principals, legal and law aspect, municipality and political aspect, Covid19 situation, and aspect of digitalization.

2.1 Formal aspect of license exam for school principals

For many decades there was no licensing exam for the role of school and preschool principal in Serbian educational system. Any experienced teacher could apply for a principals position and if he/she have a support from other colleagues and if he/she is willing and if express some leadership skills. It was desirable, also, that he/she is a good and respectable teacher. There was no need for special knowledge of legal procedures and law, and the same is with finance, economy and accounting.

After many years and some sort of evolution of school principals role in Serbian educational system, desired skills and knowledge for school principals, are now bigger and wider (Terziu et al, 2016; Leithwood et al, 1982).

Three years ago, the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development decided to regulate this field. Certain regulations and bylaws were adopted, and based on that, the government was able to regulate this process and, finally, to improve the overall quality of education.

In the last 3 years, any teacher in Serbia has the opportunity to apply for the so-called "exam for licensing principals", which consisting of three parts:

¹ *Official Gazette of RS, The Law in the Basics of Educational System, No. 88/17, 27/18, 10/19.*

- presentation of the research of educational practice, key research results and recommendations for the improvement of educational practice,
- verification of compliance with the competency standard for the director, and
- presentation of the content of the candidate's portfolio, which contains evidence of the achieved results and previous professional experience.

So, now we have a relatively demanding complex exam that is approached with a lot of seriousness. As such, it ensures the raising of the competencies of the principal and thus contributes to the strengthening and improvement of the overall skills of the future principal of the school or kindergarten. On the other hand, it provides them with some new necessary knowledge. This type of exam also requires very serious but proper preparation, which is regulated in detail by a bylaw (Grissom et al, 2018).

Old habits have to be replaced with a new habits, and that should be in accordance with new challenges.

The results of this approach are already visible. More professional and educated principals are more acceptable solution for leadership in educational institutions. They are better managers and better leaders. They know about all educational processes more than others, so they are now “right persons on the right place”. And we can all agree that this is significantly better solution for a country's education system than it was in previous years.

This serious and well structured and organized approach brings better results in leadership and in educational process too (Bossert, 1982). But, even more important, it guarantees better quality of school work, better results and better quality of education.

2.2 Legal and law aspect

Does one school principal needs to know educational laws, labour laws and other legal regulative? Does he/she need to know elements of economy? We can say that thirty years ago, principal role in Serbia was much easier. Everything was well ordered and organized, almost all about legal matters and about financial matters was well structured and organized, by state government or by local municipality. So, at in those circumstances, principal was not real manager, but more like coordinator of all processes in school. He/she did not have a need for dealing with laws, public procurement, organizing excursions, etc. But what does it look like today?

We have to admit that role of principals today is much different. There are so many processes during management of school, that he/she must be aware of them and processes that school principal by himself/herself must fully control (Stern, 1978). And that is why he/she needs to have a very good knowledge. In fact... he/she must know all educational and labour laws. Then he/she must have good knowledge of economy, finance and accounting. And public procurements, of course. Management skills are necessary too. And, of course... the last but not the least. Very good knowledge of teaching process and teachers job (Elihami et al., 2017)

Is this, maybe, too much for one person? Even if it is a school principal? Not at all, definitely. Because if it is too much there would not be always more candidates for each principals position. Attraction of this leaders position is obvious, despite the knowledge requirements. It can be explained, maybe, with higher salary, by wide influence on educational process and colleagues, and maybe just a simple need for power.

So, we can conclude that school principal today must be successful mix of lawyer, economist, manager and educational expert. This is a kind of modern school management, it is more demanding and there are so many new challenges. Only good competences in all mentioned areas can guarantee successful school leadership.

And to not forget... if school principal would like to try to participate with his/her school in European projects, knowledge of english language is also necessary, or at least desirable.

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So now we can clearly emphasize that the old approach to the role of director is a thing of the past. New habits and a constant need for new skills are already there. New demanding challenges are an integral part of the everyday life of future school principals.

2.3 Aspect of municipality and political engagement

We can be sure that thirty or forty years ago, schools and school employees, including school principals, were completely out of politics. They were dealing exclusively with educational matters and teaching process in school. There was no need that principal be a part of political life in municipality, and there was not to many interruption of school processes, from the side of politicians.

Many things changed (Howe et al, 2000; Masterson, 2017) and they changed in Serbia, also. Probably in similar manner, like in other countries, like in other educational systems. Today, school principal must be a person who is involved in all processes in local municipality and wider society. He/she cannot be separated, he/she must be fully engaged. School principal are now respectable persons in municipality, they have very descent integrity (Blasé et al, 1987; Cuban, 2009). They are well known in society, they compare in public their school results, they are proud on achievements of their schools.

There are so many situations when work and activities of school principals are affected and influenced by, mostly local politics. This is not influence regarding school programs – because school programs and curricula are in the charge of Ministry of Education and other state institutions and can not be changed. That influence is, mostly, about process of selection of new employees, ie. regarding human resources. It might look like not so big deal, because it is not directly connected with teaching process and children. But... on the other hand, if local politicians force principals to bring into the school some people, some teachers that are not so good and prepared, after some period, it would be long term bad influence of such activities, and negative for learning and teaching process.

Another segment of possible political influence of local municipality political leaders to school principals is similar like with other directors or managers of public institutions – regarding public procurements. It is always desirable that school principal cooperate with companies and businessmen who is close to local municipality. It is usually hard for principal to avoid, because local municipality has big influence on his election, so principal have to be in good relations and polite to local municipality leaders.

So, to conclude, modern school principal in Serbia, have be involved in most processes in local municipality and wider society. He/she must be fully engaged and in permanent relations with local political authorities.

2.4 Aspect of Covid-19 pandemia

During 2020, we have had one big change in our lives – COVID19 pandemia. And it still last, more than year after. The impact of the pandemic on education is extremely large. In fact, education might be one of mostly affected areas of social life in our municipalities and states. And this is not specific only for Serbian educational system, because similar situation is in almost all countries and educational systems in the world.

Schools are not the same anymore (Harris, 2020). Most of our children are at home, using online educational contents, television broadcasts or some sort of hybrid learning (IEQE, 2020) systems. If students go to school, it is necessary to respect specific measures such as physical distance and a smaller number of students in classrooms. Teachers are working, partly from schools, partly from homes, but there is one fact, that is for sure: teachers are working more then earlier and their job is harder now, because they must combine different types of teaching processes, different teaching tools, and to adjust everything for each student, particulary (Russel, 2020).

Overall shape of educational process, do students need to go to school or not, and all decisions about how the school should work are changing every week or two. So, this is one very, very complicated situation in education (Harris et al, 2020), caused by COVID19.

How did students respond to this situation? How did parents react at the same time? How did teachers react to those new challenges? How did principals react? These are many issues and we will deal with each of them separately.

The indisputable fact that we have to admit is that, after the first shock in March 2020, our students managed the fastest. They adapted to the new situation, almost immediately, they adopted new available high-tech tools and a new way of learning. They showed us how we need to adapt and make some evolutionary changes in the moment.

Right after students, next group that adjusted and adopted changes were parents. They accepted new role, to use digital tools for learning together with their children, and they endeavored to help their children in teaching process, despite new circumstances.

After parents, we have teachers. They adopted changes very slow, with long peridod of refusing. ~~People~~ Persons who are responsible for work with young generations, who are the future of our country in every sense, they waited to much. They expected that everything will be again like in previous period. Anyway, during summer 2020 they final accepted this new reality and new state of mind.

And what about the directors? It was necessary for the Directors to show more flexibility. It was necessary to immediately change the previous ways of working. All teaching processes in the schools changed in just one night. The usual communication and cooperation with colleagues was no longer possible. Even school meetings have moved to viber groups, zoom sessions, MS team meetings. The meetings of the teachers' council were digital. And the

director had to have an absolute insight into everything, it was necessary to be the first to adapt to the new situation.

New age brought new habits and new demands for principals. Everything came very fast and this was a real challenge for the future. Principals accepted this challenge – they had to. Principals are now real leaders in all school aspects.

2.5 Aspect of digitalization

Digitalization of educational process was not inducted only by COVID19 pandemic. It is only forced at that moment, to be fully implemented immediately. Educational system and whole society was preparing for digitalization for more than 30 years. And education will, probably, accept fully digitalization, even without COVID19 pandemic. Only question could be “when”. But now, we are in some kind of new reality (Rott, 2018). We took a “step of 1000 miles”. And there is no return, education will never move back. Teachers and students will never again work without mobile phones, tablets, laptop and computer (Debes, 2018). All technological tools and improvements will stay in teaching process, even after this specific situation (Gobble, 2018).

Where is school principal? What was the role of school principal earlier? How should each good principal act today? What will be the future role of school principal?

He/she have to be involved in almost all processes (Lindqvist et al, 2018), and to be aware of his/her role and importance. If students and teachers need to have improved digital competences (MoESTD, 2019), principal must be even better, because he/she must control the whole process. If students and teachers had to be active participants of hybrid model of learning (IEQE, 2020), school principal must be even more informed and familiar with that approach in teaching. So, the role of school principal becomes even more difficult and even more significant and important.

School principals in Serbia, as in other countries today probably, in this digital age must be some kind of “digital principals”. He/she must be familiar with all new digital tools and all novel approaches in use of technology in the educational process. They already made a big step during last year.

He/she have to be aware for using new technologies and properly prepared, but not only in classroom, but also in communication with teachers, in leading meetings with teachers and meeting of Teachers council, using internet portals and internet sites related to laws and finance. Digital way of acting and digital way of thinking became one of the key competences of one modern and successful school principal in Serbian school.

3. Research and results

3.1 Description of research

3.1.1. Sample

In this research participated 264 school principals from School Department of Belgrade. The selection of the School Department of Belgrade was made, based on two criteria:

- a large number of schools in the territory of School Department;
- mix of urban and suburban schools.

The majority of this sample consists of male principals (58%), while percentage of women in the principal role is slightly lower (42%). Almost half of the sample consisted of respondents of age between 50 and 59 (45.8%), followed by respondents aged 40 to 49 (38.3%). The lowest percentage were respondents aged 60 and higher (11.7 %).

When we consider work experience, the largest number of respondents have been working in education for over 21 years (63.6%). In the position of principal, most principals are in the first term of school management (34.8%), followed by respondents who are principals between 5 and 8 years (28.4%). It is especially interesting to note that as many as 69 respondents (26.1%) have been in the position of primary school principal for more than 12 years.

3.1.2. Instrument

For the purposes of this research, an online questionnaire (Google Forms) was created for primary school principals (14 closed questions) shown in the form of an assessment scale and one open-ended question. The questionnaire contains three groups of questions compiled in accordance with the subject of the research. The first group of questions refers to sociodemographic data (gender, years of service, years of service in the position of director).

The second group of questions refers to the type of primary school (number of students, urban and suburban environment).

The third group of questions refers to the decision-making on teaching staff and non-teaching staff, budget, teaching materials and methods of evaluation. Also, in the third group of questions we had questions related to the influence the ministry, School department or school board on decision making.

The fourth group of issues relates to the management of the educational institution during the COVID 19 pandemic. All questions were required, except the last, optional question.

The last question in the questionnaire was open-ended and respondents were able to share their experience of school management during the COVID 19 pandemic.

3.1.3. Research method

Given the subject of research and the created instrument, we use descriptive statistics and the method of content analysis.

3.1.4. Data analysis

In the analysis, we especially deal with the principal's opinion on school management in the regular and in circumstances challenging COVID 19 pandemic. Although the legislation requires otherwise, the majority of principals (36%) claim that the Ministry of Education or the School Department has a direct influence on decision-making on teaching staff and staff, budget and evaluation methods (see Figure 1).

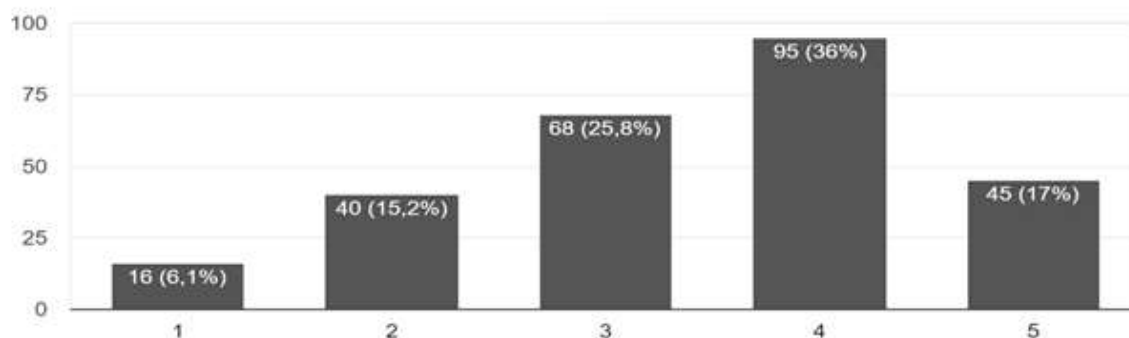


Figure 1: Decisions about human resources, budget and methods of evaluation is on Ministry of Education

Figure 2 shows the answers of the respondents to the question on the impact on decision-making on teaching staff and staff, budget, materials and the method of evaluation performed by the School Board. Most respondents, 36.4%, confirmed the direct influence of the school board on decision-making.

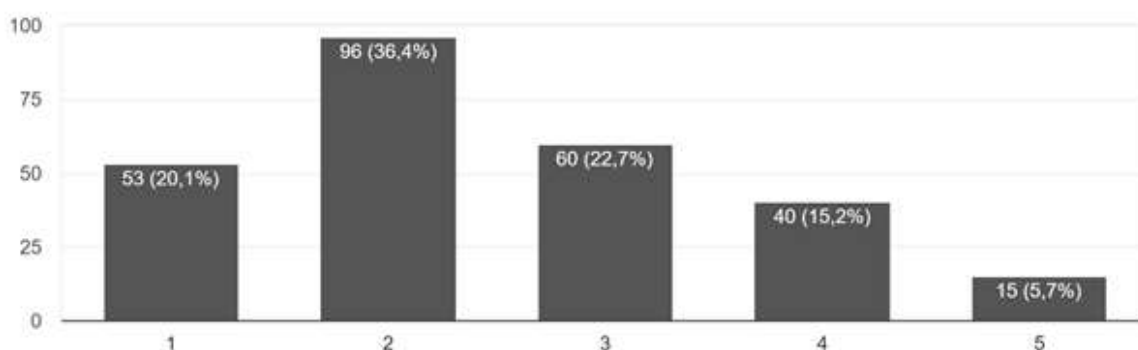


Figure 2: Decision about human resources, budget and methods of evaluation is on School Board

The School Board participates in numerous activities of the school: adopts the statute of the School, adopts internal school bylaws and other general acts. It also comments organization and systematization of work; adopts the School program, School development plan, Annual school work plan, adopts reports on their implementation and the Report on evaluation and self-evaluation; determines the proposal of the financial plan for the preparation of the budget of the Republic of Serbia; adopts the financial plan of the School in accordance with the Law; adopts the public procurement plan of the School; adopts the Report on the operations of the School, the Annual Accounting, the Report on the excursion; decides on the leasing, ie leasing of school space; decides on the expanded activities of the School, status change, change of the name and seat of the School in accordance with the Law.

Also, the school board is responsible for the position of principal by announcing a public competition, no later than three months before the end of the term of the current principal and electing the school principal; decides on the rights, obligations and responsibilities of the

School Director; makes a decision on the appointment of the acting director in accordance with the Law; dismisses the director of the School from office in accordance with the Law;

On the other hand, the competencies of the school board are also giving an opinion to the director of the school in the process of deciding on the selection of teachers and professional associates for employment. The school board is also responsible for other activities such as the appointment of members of the Expert Team for Development Planning; forming various education commission, etc.

In addition to everything mentioned so far, the school board is also responsible for considering respect for general principles, achieving the goals of education and standards of student achievement, as well as taking measures to improve working conditions and achieve educational work. The school board adopts the Plan of professional development of employees and adopts a report on its implementation; decides on objections, respectively appeals against the director's decision; Finally, one of his last roles is to make a decision on initiating the procedure for appointing members of the School Board no later than two months before the expiration of the mandate of the previously appointed members of the School Board.

A special issue related to the challenges during the KOVID 19 pandemic. Respondents were offered the factors shown in

Table 1. Factors that made teaching process more difficult during period of KOVID 19 pandemia

| Table 1: Factors that made teaching process more difficult during period of KOVID 19 pandemia | | |
|--|-----------------------|------------|
| Factor | Teachers (out of 264) | Percentage |
| Limited Access of students to digital devices | 141 | 53,4% |
| Limited Access of students to digital devices | 165 | 62,5% |
| Low digital competences of students | 60 | 22,7% |
| Low digital competences of parents | 99 | 37,5% |
| Low digital competences of teachers | 57 | 21,6% |
| Low level of technical suport for teachers | 89 | 33,7% |
| Low level of technical suport for students | 106 | 40,2% |
| Bad procedures and instructions for distance learning | 65 | 24,6% |
| Difficulties in students engagement | 132 | 50,0% |
| Difficulties in support to families for distance learning | 101 | 38,3% |
| Teacher doesnt have enough expirience for distance learning | 120 | 45,5% |
| No training for teachers regarding distance learning | 75 | 18,0% |

The largest number of respondents pointed out that the main hindering factor for the realization of distance learning is the difficult access of students to a good internet connection. Given that the research was conducted in the capital, where economic conditions are better than in other parts of our country, this data implies that further research is needed. Also, in 2019, the Republic Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia researched the use of information and communication technologies in Serbia and it

was determined that 80.1% of households have an Internet connection. Respondents' answers indicate the quality of the internet connection, so the types of connections should be investigated in future work.

As a hindering factor for the realization of distance learning, 50% of respondents point out the difficulties in engaging students. Student engagement refers to student behavior in school, through engagement during learning and in relation to academic achievement, and through student engagement through school-related activities. During distance learning, students' extracurricular activities are kept to a minimum. To process the answer to the 14th question, an open-ended question, the method of content analysis was used. Respondents' answers can be divided into two categories.

The first category emphasizes the quick response of the authorities to the pandemic, as well as the high motivation and competence of distance teaching teachers. The second category of answers refers to increased demands during distance learning, the need to solve problems on the go, as well as concerns about the health of students and school staff. Most respondents agree that it is necessary to raise the competencies of employees for the use of information and communication technologies. Here is one of the detailed answers: When the pandemic started in March 2020, we were all surprised and asked the question: What now? However, we organized ourselves very quickly and started to establish communication with the students. First they were viber groups. Soon platforms like google classroom, zoom and the like were launched. In a short time, we quickly matured digitally.

Most students got used to the new technologies very quickly. We only remember the trial final exam which was online. As a principal, I set myself the task of encouraging teachers to start researching digital platforms and tools on their own, to try, experiment and thus gain experience related to distance learning. I followed the offer of webinars and conferences related to digitalization and forwarded it to my colleagues. I worked on raising the awareness and responsibility of teachers to do their job professionally and to find time for each student. It was necessary to help and support parents to accept modern technologies as a reality. Many introduced the Internet, bought tablets, mobile phones or computers and thus helped their children to follow online classes. I think the education system has coped with this difficult situation."

4. Conclusions

In this paper we discuss several different aspects or different fields of expertise that any manager of educational institution in Serbia must have, in order to act like successful manager. We analyze:

- (1) formal aspect of licencing process for school principals,
- (2) aspect of law, bylaws and regulations,
- (3) political and society aspect,

(4) medical aspect as a consequence of COVID19 crisis and also

(5) aspect of implementation of new educational technologies and digitalization in educational process.

Special attention is given on a new challenges in management, that arises during COVID19 crisis.

An interesting research was implemented with principals of schools, preschool institutions and other educational institutions, regarding all those aspects. 264 principals participated in this research. In this paper we presented obtained results, we analyze them and also we give following conclusions:

- New approach with “principal licencing exam”, guarantees improving leadership, management and overall skills of one school principal. More educated principals are better solution for leadership in educational institutions. This approach guarantees better results in leadership, but even more important, in educational process too.
- School principal must be very successful mix of lawyer, economist, manager and of course teacher and educational expert. This is a kind of modern school management, it is much more demanding and there are so many new challenges.
- Local municipality and local political authorities have big influence on principals election, so each principal have to be in good relations and polite to local municipality leaders. It means that modern school principal in Serbia, have be involved in most processes in local municipality and wider society. He/she must be fully engaged and in permanent relations with local political authorities.
- Principals accepted COVID19 challenge with a great flexibility and they changed and adjusted their way of work immediately. All activities were moved to: ~~Principals went digital~~: google classrooms, viber groups, zoom sessions, MS Teams meetings. New age brought new habits and new demands for principals, and this was a real challenge for the future. Principals accepted this challenge and they are now real leaders in all school aspects.
- Today, in this digital age, school principals both in Serbia and in other countries, must be a kind of " digital principals ". Familiar with all new digital tools, familiar with all novell approaches in use of technology in the educational process, aware of all aspects of using new technologies, properly prepared for digitalization in classroom, but also in management, legal decisions, and finance. Digital way of acting and digital way of thinking wil be the key competences of school principal in future, too.

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