

16 Introducing Total Quality Management to Basic Education schools in Oman - Are they ready for it?

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aims

The purpose of this study is to find out whether schools are ready to implement a total quality management (TQM) system. Part of this process is to discover the extent to which school staff are familiar with TQM and its principles.

TQM has been described as a way of completing work cooperatively (Jablonski, 1991). First applied to manufacturing, it is "seen as pre-eminently a Japanese innovation", although its "techniques were originally developed in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s" (Burnes, 1992, p. 151). At its simplest, TQM "is an organisation-wide effort to improve quality through changes in structure, practices, systems and, above all, attitudes" (ibid). TQM in education is "a philosophy, supported by a comprehensive toolkit, driven by students and staff, in order to identify, analyze and remove the barriers to learning" (Davies & West-Burnham, 1997, p. 206).

1.2 Background and rationale

In an earlier study (Al-Maqbali, 2005), I learned that top management is willing to implement TQM in Omani schools. I also learned that most top managers have at least a sense for the need for a quality assurance system throughout the education sector. For TQM to succeed as an innovation, though, commitment within schools is required.

The education system in Oman has been through enormous changes in the last few years, as articles earlier in this volume have detailed. I will discuss the research context further, and the way in which quality assurance issues are currently addressed, while considering the literature on TQM.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theory and Principles of TQM

TQM describes an approach to quality assurance which stresses the importance of creating a culture for 'quality', which can be defined as what satisfies the consumer: reliability; excellence; the extent to which predefined objectives have been met through fitness for purpose and conformance to specifications.

TQM is a comprehensive and structured approach to organizational management that seeks to improve the quality of products and services through ongoing refinements in response to continuous feedback. It has been argued that all levels of the organization and all staff should be involved in the quality processes and objectives (Collins, 1994).

According to Davis & West-Burnham (1997), the four most important components of TQM are:

- the status of the customer
- the emphasis on values and vision of the organisation
- the management of processes
- the significance attached to the management of people; human resources development

The integration of all the above components could be the fifth key component of TQM. These components should be given equal significance.

In his article, 'The Quality Revolution in Education', Bonstingl (1992), cited by Mehrotra (2002), outlines the TQM principles he believes are most salient to education reform. He calls them the "Four Pillars of Total Quality Management." In the first principle he emphasises the importance of teacher-student relationships. He argues that their successful work together could lead to the full development of student's capabilities. Continuous improvement is the second principle. The third principle is to emphasise that when a problem occurs the whole system should be checked. The fourth TQM principle is the commitment of top management as without this the implementation of TQM could fail. Management should take responsibility and coach their institution to the fullest recommended stage in applying TQM.

TQM describes a philosophy which tries to make quality the driving force behind leadership, design, planning, and improvement initiatives. For this reason, Padhi (2002) argues, TQM requires eight key elements. These elements can be divided into the following four groups according to their function.

1. Foundation - Includes: Ethics, Integrity and Trust.
2. Building Bricks - Includes: Training, Teamwork and Leadership.
3. Binding Mortar - Includes: Communication.
4. Roof - Includes: Recognition.



Figure 1: Padhi's (2002) Eight elements of TQM

Understanding the need for TQM encourages organisations to prepare for it. According to Al-Azawi (2005), the following are required:

- **Leadership:** Using management styles that involve exploring the organisations' processes, listening to employees' problems, keeping communication channels open and ensuring organisational goals and objectives are clear and known to all employees.
- **Commitment:** Gaining the commitment of top management for the long term through training in the basic elements and principles of the TQM philosophy, providing sufficient resources for this and gaining the commitment of employees, too.
- **Team Work:** Integrating all employees, so they are one giant organisation committed to one shared goal, focusing their efforts and abilities on one target and holding themselves accountable for fulfilling their duties. Teams should be composed of people with various backgrounds and types of knowledge, who can share ideas cooperatively and learn from each other to overcome challenges.
- **Effective Design:** Creating effective designs for the processes or services offered (e.g.; the curriculum and teaching-learning processes in education) raises the overall quality. Under TQM, this is essential to keeping an organisation competitive.
- **Focusing on Process:** Process is vital under TQM as the source of a quality service. Organizations need to invest in process.

The relationships between the essential requirements for TQM discussed above are illustrated in the figure, below.

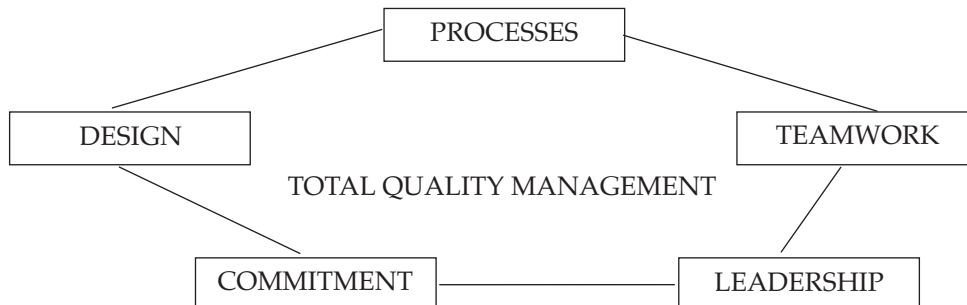


Figure 2: Relationships between TQM components (Azawi, 2005)

2.2 Implementing TQM

An overall strategy for approaching the implementation of TQM is as follows: preparing the ground; defining the base line; setting targets; planning for implementation; implementing; revising the base line and taking off. Each of these steps should be informed by the 'Plan, Do, Check and Act' cycle (Matthews, 1996; Seddon, 2005).

There are three different levels at which TQM can be applied, as Davies & West-Burnham (1997) argue. The lowest level is restricted to the management processes of the school. Though this is likely to lead to improvements, it is unlikely to inspire students and teachers or deal with learning processes. In contrast, the highest level is total quality learning, when the application impacts the classroom.

Actual processes that can be used to implement TQM include:

- evaluating the organisation's culture, in terms of studying the role of top management, quality policy, training, quality data and reporting, employee relations (Wankhade & Dabade, 2005)
- training
- establishing a quality committee
- informing
- integrating, in accordance with a strategic plan (Williams, 1999)

Once TQM is in place, the degree to which integration has occurred can be assessed through use of the following checklist, developed by Baidoun (2004):

Table 1: Baidoun's (2004) critical quality factors checklist (with some modifications)

CONSTRUCT	CRITICAL QUALITY FACTOR
Construct 1: Demonstrate top management commitment and involvement	Senior executives assume active responsibility for evaluation and improvement of management system, and lead quality drive Elements of quality management structure in place to manage the organisation's quality journey Visibility of senior executive's commitment to quality and customer satisfaction Clear and consistent communication of mission statement and objectives defining quality values, expectations and focus Comprehensive policy development and effective deployment of goals
Construct 2: Ensure employee commitment and involvement	The entire workforce understands, and is committed to vision, values and quality goals of the organisation Training for employees to improve interactive skills (such as communication skills, effective meeting skills, empowerment and leading skills) Effective top-down and bottom-up communication Supervisors, unit heads and divisional managers assume active roles as facilitators of continuous improvement, coaches of new methods and leaders of empowered employees Training for employees in problem identification and solving skills, quality improvement skills and other technical skills
Construct 3: Manage by customer-driven systems and processes	A formal documented quality management system in place Comprehensive identification of customers and customer needs and alignment of processes to satisfy the needs The entire organisation understands that each individual and each process has internal customers and suppliers Application of total quality management to support services and processes Systematic review and analysis of key process measures that have a direct and indirect impact on value-addition to customer satisfaction Reliance on reasonable resources which are selected based on their quality and value for money
Construct 4: Create continuous improvement culture	Problem solving and continuous improvement processes based on facts and systematic analysis The use of surveys and feedback processes, and tracking of other key measures to assess customer satisfaction

By checking these guidelines, an organisation can decide on the level of its implementation of TQM and then make decisions about how to improve.

2.3 Strengths and Weaknesses of TQM

TQM's strengths include: increased employee participation and morale; better use of resources as a result of process analysis, and increased co-operation across departments. Enhancing solutions to problems and making communication easier are other strengths of TQM. Moreover, TQM can enhance the competitive position of the organisation as it focuses on encouraging and maintaining quality. Furthermore, TQM can help the organisation in achieving its main goals and objectives in the most cost-effective and efficient way possible. Also, TQM can provide a suitable culture for continuous improvement (Al-Azawi, 2005).

TQM's weaknesses include the time and effort needed to implement the approach, without which there might be a failure to understand TQM or provide institutional commitment. TQM should not be implemented by only one part of the organisation, but rather should be implemented as a whole philosophy. Davies & West-Burnham (1997) describe the difficulty of changing the attitudes of all individuals as a challenge that can make TQM fail. Unfortunately, TQM is sometimes regarded as the magic cure to all organisational problems, which is very dangerous. In addition, some institutions concentrate more on internal processes while neglecting customers' needs, or do not adapt quality programmes to fit the needs of their own organisation (Al-Azawi, 2005). According to Burnes (1992), it has been argued that over 90 per cent of TQM initiatives fail.

2.4 Commitment to improving quality in education in Oman

The Ministry of Education is committed to improving quality in education. A recommendation made at the 1995 conference for economic vision, 'Oman2020', was that education should:

aim to raise and develop the general cultural standard, promote scientific thought, kindle the spirit of research, respond to the requirements of economic and social plans, build a generation that is physically and morally strong and takes pride in its nation and heritage and preserves its achievements (MoE, 2004).

In 1997, the green light was given to develop the education system (MoE, 2001) and an "ambitious on-going reform programme to develop the whole of the school education system" was initiated (MoE, 2005, p.6). Central to this reform are concepts we associate with TQM, quality and efficiency. In its action plan for 2001, the Ministry of Education planned to:

- Conduct a full analysis of its hierarchical management, communications and information transfer processes.
- Reform and reinforce the management system and encourage decentralization.
- Adopt a decision-making system built on correct up-to-date information, and an effective implementation system, involving evaluation and feedback.
- Improve the communication system both vertically and horizontally.
- Build a culture for professional development and self-evaluation (MoE, 2001, p. 5-6).

As part of the reform process, the Ministry of Education wants schools to be able

to “stand alone and be self-critical: identify their strengths and areas for development and take responsibility for their own development” (MoE, 2005, p. 9). For schools to be able to do this it is important that ‘reflective practices’ are adopted. Indeed, according to the Ministry, “schools are providing opportunities for their staff to work together to analyse, discuss, reflect on, plan and do something to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning in their classrooms” (ibid, p. 11). Such activities require a well trained, well informed and highly motivated staff. To help its staff develop the skills it needs to manage educational change, the Ministry organises workshops and seminars on a regular basis, both centrally and regionally.

Some of the on-going changes seen in Oman relate to curriculum, so that, for example, after a thorough review, life skills and information technology subjects have been added to the curriculum, while a core and elective programme has replaced the ‘science’ and ‘arts’ streams of Grades 11 and 12. Such changes require continuous revision, with the needs of pupils and other stakeholders (such as parents) studied and addressed.

As well as curriculum changes, there have been methodological changes, with an emphasis on adopting a student-centred approach to learning and the use of formative assessment. Individualization of instruction is encouraged and there is a project addressing learning difficulties. Besides methodological, there have also been infrastructural changes, with schools now equipped with learning resource centres and computer labs to enable both pupils and teachers to use technology in teaching and learning.

All these aspects of educational reform (relating to staff and school development, changes in curriculum, methodology and infrastructure) are compatible with the goals and principles of TQM. The Ministry of Education recognizes “that there can be no end point to the process of establishing a quality education system” (MoE, 2005, p.11). It is my contention that by drawing together under a TQM system all the programmes and initiatives supported by the Ministry of Education and focused on improving quality in education in Oman, greater success in assuring quality could be achieved. In this research, I plan to investigate the readiness of schools for such a system, focusing on basic education schools for Grades 1-10 (discussed earlier in this volume), which were at the forefront of educational reform in the late nineties.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research question

My main research question was as follows: To what extent are basic education schools in Oman ready for the implementation of TQM?

I decided to investigate this question through use of questionnaires and interviews.

3.2 Participants

The participants were drawn from six basic education schools. The characteristics of the sample were as follows:

- 51 females and 21 males

- Age range: 24 - 38 years old
- Experience: Less than 5 years = 18 participants; 5-10 years = 24 participants; 11-15 years = 24 participants; more than 15 years = 6 participants.
- 61 of the participants were teachers. The rest included headteachers, deputy school principals and social workers.
- 40 participants had bachelor degrees, 30 had diplomas and 2 did not state.

The choice of target population was based on the need to have all school staff's (school principals, teachers and other staff) perspectives on the topic. Moreover, I felt the inclusion of a cross-section of staff would enhance the validity of the findings and avoid the possibility of bias. Thus, a non-probability sampling of the population (Cohen et al., 2000) was used in this small scale research study.

The participants were randomly selected with the help of school principals. The number of participants from each school depended on the school size and staff availability on the distribution day (31st May 2005). Some schools were experiencing teacher shortages due to teachers being required to attend examination centres all over the region to monitor final exams. Out of 80 questionnaires distributed, 72 were collected.

I avoided researching the views of managers who had participated in my earlier study about introducing TQM to the Ministry of Education in Oman (Al-Maqbali, 2005) to avoid duplication.

3.3 Research Methods

I chose to conduct the research through questionnaires and informal semi-structured interviews, as these methods are appropriate for capturing the 'voices' of respondents (Cohen et al., 2000; Brown & Rodgers, 2002). Regarding the questionnaires, statements were designed according to themes taken from a literature review of TQM. The principles of TQM were written as questionnaire statements while other statements explored the situation of quality in schools and staff's willingness to consider implementing TQM.

An open-ended question was included to allow teachers who wished to do so to voice their views and opinions. As Cohen et al. (2000, p. 255) point out: "it is the open-ended responses that might contain the 'gems' of information that otherwise might not have been caught in the questionnaire. Further, it puts the responsibility for and ownership of data much more firmly into the respondents' hands".

The questionnaires were distributed and collected on the same day, given to schools at 7.30 a.m. and collected back at 11.30 a.m. In the intervening time, I interviewed school principals, carrying out these interviews in the mother tongue, Arabic. This was to encourage full descriptions of feelings and opinions without the interviewees worrying about their proficiency in English. The settings for the interviews varied, though those with school principals were generally carried out in quiet classrooms. In the same week, I also interviewed Ministry officials in their offices. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were recorded with agreement of the participants. 'Confidentiality' and 'anonymity' were assured in line with ethical procedures recommended by Cohen et al. (2000). The interviews were semi-structured to gain accounts from the subjects' "own perspectives and in their own words" (Kvale, 1996, p. 70).

3.4 Analysing the data

Quantitative data were tabulated for analysis, while qualitative data were coded and categorized, using a range of strategies suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), such as counting frequencies of occurrence, seeking plausibility and clustering. Common central themes relevant to the research questions emerged, and data were condensed and reduced (Cohen et al., 2000). Each interview was then summarized and extracts were translated and transcribed.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Quantitative data

Table 2 shows the responses to statements about TQM. All figures are in percentages. The abbreviations are as follows: SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, DK = don't know, A = Agree and SA = strongly agree.

Table 2: results of the questionnaire

No.	STATEMENT	SD	D	DK	A	SA
1	School main goal should be known , shared and understood by teachers, parents and pupils	2.8			30.6	66.6
2	School management should be given more administrative authority	2.8	8.3	4.2	51.4	31.9
3	School management should accept ideas and criticism of others (teachers, parents and pupils)	1.4	1.4		31.9	62.5
4	School work plan should be set by teachers, parents and pupils	1.4	2.8	1.4	44.4	50
5	Teams should be formed to monitor and evaluate all programs and teaching-learning processes at schools	2.8	9.7	8.3	34.7	43.1
6	Professional development of school staff should be a priority			1.4	40.2	55.6
7	Strong emphasis should be given to effective personal relationships	1.4	1.4	4.2	26.4	66.6
8	Monitoring and evaluation should be for the purpose of school development (teaching-learning improvement)	1.4		2.8	40.2	54.2
9	Quality assurance should be a priority in schools	2.8		4.2	45.8	45.8
10	Continuous improvement should always be emphasized	1.4	2.8	1.4	31.9	62.5
11	Pupils' needs should be recognized as well as teachers' needs	1.4		4.2	20.8	73.6
12	I would participate in implementing a quality assurance system		4.2	11.1	52.7	30.6
13	I believe that schools are ready to implement a quality assurance system	15.3	15.3	33.3	25	11.1
14	I am familiar with the term "total quality management"	6.9	16.7	25	48.6	2.8

In general, there is strong agreement about the need for a quality assurance system, such as TQM, in schools. Furthermore, it appears a large majority of school

staff would be willing to participate in the implementation of TQM. Respondents welcomed some TQM elements such as shared goals, continuous improvement, a monitoring and evaluation system, and professional development. However, a quarter of respondents seemed unfamiliar with the term, TQM, and, moreover, approximately two-thirds were unsure whether schools are ready for the implementation of such a system. Only just over a third seemed to believe schools are ready.

4.2 Qualitative data

The main findings from the interviews were that firstly, school principals do not have clear ideas about the main goals of their schools. Secondly, they also have different definitions of a quality education system, as there is no standard quality assurance system in basic education schools in Oman. I will discuss these findings at length, below.

5 DISCUSSION

I discuss key findings under three themes: school management; teachers and pupils; and process and monitoring. Each theme will be discussed separately below.

5.1 School Management

Good management is very important in any educational institution, and clear goals are crucial to this. Questionnaire findings showed that the vast majority of school staff (97.2%) agreed that the main goal of the school should be known to all school stakeholders. Teachers, parents and pupils should be aware of the school's objectives. This suggests that stakeholders have the right to take part in setting school policy and being involved in planning and decision-making. This is clearly explained by one of the interviewees:

If we were given the chance to participate in such a job (setting school goals and plans), we would work very hard. If school staff are willing and think they are able to participate in forming the school's main goal, then why not give them the chance to do so?

TQM emphasises the importance of school vision and mission, but this should be linked with customer satisfaction (Baidoun, 2004). Vision and mission should be the soul of schools; clear and understood by all stakeholders and in the minds and hearts of all school staff, parents and pupils. This would provide the commitment needed to create a suitable environment for TQM to be implemented successfully (ibid). The presence of vision and mission would create a quality culture, with "ownership of responsibility for quality at all levels of the organization and involvement of all staff in the pursuit of clear and explicit quality objectives" (Collins, 1994, p. 40). Unfortunately, some school principals in this study are unclear about their role in schools. Some think their role is "to make sure all staff are performing according to the rules and regulations of the ministry". Others think their role is "to make sure that both teachers and pupils are attending their classes." Unfortunately, this is not the way things should be in schools.

The majority of participants (83.3%) agreed that schools should be given more

authority on administrative matters. Although all the interviewed school principals indicated they would like more autonomy, they feel there is little incentive for schools to innovate. Ministry officials need to be aware of this situation and determine strategies to address it. These could include supporting the growth of technical skills in defining goals and targets, for, as Al-Zamany et al. (2002) argue, it is important that school managers are competent in this area.

Recently, a ministerial resolution gave more authority to schools, but only in some administrative areas. Of course, there are dangers of decentralisation, as it might lead to “diffusion of authority and responsibility” reducing ministerial capacity “to undertake drastic measures and changes”, as Sirvanci (2004, p. 383) argues can happen in educational systems. However, I believe that in the present situation, with nearly 95% of school staff Omani, time is ripe for decentralisation. In the questionnaire, respondents indicated a need for greater authority invested in the school in areas like curriculum, management and self-evaluation.

Interestingly, though, a small minority of participants (11%) do not want school management to be given more authority. The reason behind this could be fear of rigorous auditing if schools have more authority in management. This could suggest that school staff do not wish to be held accountable for failure in achieving the required level of school performance. Future studies in Oman should investigate such cases more deeply, in an effort to find solutions.

The great majority of participants (94%) believe school management should accept ideas and criticism from others, gaining feedback from teachers, parents and pupils, which would help strengthen links between education and society, as UNESCO (2005) argues for. By accepting others’ ideas, schools could create a culture which encourages employee involvement and participation; a TQM principle (Sirvanci, 2004). Employee empowerment through participation and involvement is also a quality success factor (Baidoun, 2004). In my opinion, pupils should be given the chance to express their ideas about the curriculum, as they are customers. The local society should also be consulted.

While traditional policy making has been top-down and non-negotiable, of late there has been more discussion of policy at the grassroots level. Qualitative questionnaire data suggest that, while schools are increasingly being allowed to participate in the decision-making process, fuller consultation between ministry officials and school staff would be preferred.

TQM could help the Ministry of Education involve all stakeholders in education matters. This would improve school cultures and make it easier for top management to see that programmes were implemented according to both the Ministry’s objectives as well as the interests of society.

5.2 Teachers and Pupils

The great majority of respondents (93%) agreed there is a need for effective personal relationships between school staff (statement 7). As Wankhade & Dabade (2005) argue, relationships between employees shape the success of an institution’s quality system implementation. Strong and supportive relationships can lead to the formation of effective teams and contribute to overall success. Harmony is required

between all stakeholders, including relationships between: teacher-management; teacher-pupil; school-parent; and management-school (UNESCO, 2005).

TQM puts great emphasis on the recognition of pupils' needs and seeks to consider these as much as possible. The great majority of respondents (94.4%) supported this idea. It is very important that pupils' needs are met. According to UNESCO (2005), pupils normally stay longer at school and attend more regularly if they feel they are learning. If we consider pupils as customers, then satisfying them and trying to fulfil their needs could be considered as providing 'quality' (Sirvanci, 2004). If, however, we consider pupils as final products, then these products have to be good quality, which depends on the needs of customers (who might be the labour market or the higher education institutions). Personally, I would like to see more account taken of pupils' (and teachers') needs in the planning process, with budgets allocated accordingly. There are signs of progress in this regard, with an initiative promoting more child-centred classrooms having been taken up and supported by the Ministry of Education recently.

TQM emphasises the importance of training and professional development, especially in educational institutions, and the great majority of respondents (94.4%) agree as to its importance. Professional development is an area in which the Ministry of Education has been very active, and there are many pre-service and in-service training programs for almost all school staff in Oman. Training centres in every region have been established and equipped with all necessary facilities, though there is a shortage of professional instructors, especially in management. In addition, in 2006 training rooms in each school were established. These are managed by school teams, who develop the school's own professional development plans, which are then budgeted for. This form of employee empowerment is described by Baidoun (2004) as highly valuable in achieving quality and success.

5.3 School Process and Monitoring

The vast majority of respondents (94.4%) are interested in being involved in setting school plans for their own schools. Previously, schools in Oman worked according to plans set by the Ministry of Education that they should follow step by step, and inevitably such plans could not account for the unique circumstances of each school. Nowadays, schools are encouraged to set their own plans after self-evaluation, but these plans are usually only for the administrative section of schools. Under the concept of TQM, school plans should cover all aspects of school activities, including the main goal, vision and mission, and areas such as developing pupils and curricula. Ideally, too, all school stakeholders could participate in the planning process, so that local needs are fully addressed.

Over three-quarters of the respondents (77.8%) agreed that teams should be formed to help monitor and evaluate all programmes and teaching-learning processes at school. For this to be effective, however, training would be required, and there is no plan to introduce such a system, as one of the top management people interviewed explained. He justified his answer by saying "schools are not qualified to evaluate themselves." In my opinion, teamwork, one of the key elements of TQM (Sirvanci, 2004), would need to be strengthened beforehand.

However, a school principal pointed out that “teachers don’t want to participate in any further programmes and always complain about the load of work they have.” Gaining a commitment to teamwork is vital for TQM to work, as Baidoun (2004) argues.

Monitoring and evaluation as part of the process, are vital for achieving quality, though. As Fullan & Stiegelbauer (1991, p. 87) explain: “ The success of implementation is highly dependent on the establishment of effective ways of getting information on how well or how poorly a change is going in the classroom and school.” So, the quality of these processes shapes the success of the programme, as Wankhade & Dabade (2005) also maintain. With regard to monitoring and evaluation, TQM can be very effective, by facilitating continuous improvement of every aspect of the teaching-learning process and aligning an organisation with its stakeholders (Baidoun, 2004). Some school staff may see monitoring and evaluation processes as a threat rather than a necessary part of quality improvement, but if they have been working insufficiently well, then they should be feeling threatened and held accountable for their underperformance (Al-Zamany et al., 2002). Schools need a continuous improvement system which would include monitoring and evaluation as parts of other tools.

Quality assurance in schools should not be about accepting or rejecting programmes and projects through monitoring and evaluation, but rather improving “all aspects of quality of education” (UNESCO, 2005, p. 28). However, there is no clear quality assurance system in Omani schools, although a great majority of respondents (91.6%) recommend that establishing such a system should be a priority. Quality is not well defined, however, in the Omani educational context, as became apparent when respondents explained it differently. For instance, while quality is ‘the extent to which schools have met their objectives’ for a manager in the Ministry of Education headquarters, several other respondents interviewed defined it in terms of high marks achieved by pupils or the number of pupils who gained entry to higher education institutions. In general, there is no clear definition of ‘quality’ in our schools.

Quality, though, according to the Dakar Framework for Action and Millennium Development Goals is to “have access to completely free and compulsory primary education of good quality” and to “improve all aspects of the quality of education” (UNESCO, 2005, p. 28). Oman works very hard to achieve these goals, according to this report.

TQM could provide the framework to keep schools committed to quality goals and objectives. Quality assurance should keep an institution on the right path no matter what the circumstances are. The Ministry of Education will hopefully start a quality assurance system in schools in the coming years.

5.4 The Way Forward

Encouragingly, a large majority of questionnaire respondents (83.3%) indicated a willingness to participate in implementing TQM in their schools, as did all the interviewed principals. These findings suggest that if the Ministry of Education did pilot TQM in basic education schools, many stakeholders would be committed and

willing to participate, which would help the system succeed. Commitment described here does not merely “mean provision of the necessary means”, but also “active involvement in all phases of the process” of planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of TQM (Al-Zamany et al., 2002, p. 240).

In order for a TQM system to be implemented, the commitment of top management is required. Such commitment could be a driving force, with school staff commitment a pressure to move forwards in terms of quality practices, as Al-Zamany et al. (2002) describe such a relationship. As earlier reported (2, above), top management have indicated willingness to implement TQM in Omani schools (Al-Maqbali, 2005).

When it comes to schools’ readiness to implement a TQM system, participants divide into three approximately equal groups. There are two groups at the extremes with 36.1% who agree that schools are ready for such a system and 30.6% who think that schools are not yet ready. 33.3% are not sure about this matter. My interpretation is that school staff might have different perspectives about what is meant by schools being ready for such a system. Some might think of school buildings and equipment while others might think of school management and staff. Others may think they do not have sufficient information to decide. According to Burnes (2004), who claims it is difficult to introduce and sustain TQM, school readiness means that all parts of the schooling system are ready, and it may have been difficult for respondents to consider such a large issue.

In general, half the school staff surveyed report not being familiar with the term ‘Total Quality Management’ (Table 2, above), and, as far as I am aware, no state school has implemented TQM. If the Ministry of Education wants to implement this system, then it should first develop a plan to inform, then train and finally reach the implementation stage.

In my opinion, before implementing such a system, the Ministry should regulate the selection of school principals carefully. A well-planned training program should be provided, including a quality assurance section which might include TQM. Next, school principals should be held responsible for following TQM principles and carrying out training sessions for school staff as well as other stakeholders.

6 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The main finding of this research was that basic education schools are willing to participate in the implementation of TQM, but first need serious development in different areas, especially concerning school management. With the introduction of TQM, the Ministry of Education would be able to hold basic education schools much more accountable for achieving educational objectives.

I am conscious, though, that I am basing this finding on a study that does possess some limitations. My research was small-scale, involving staff in only six schools in one town in Oman, and was reliant on questionnaire data, collected quickly as I needed to return to my studies in the UK, and interviews conducted in a relatively short time. Furthermore, I investigated only the willingness and readiness of school staff to participate in the implementation of TQM and therefore did not consider

many other issues that influence implementation.

Nevertheless, the research did uncover a willingness to accept TQM, which is encouraging. For the system to be implemented successfully, though, commitment would be required at every stage, from provision to planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (Al-Zamany et al., 2002). Infrastructure is also important, with links between information systems, educational management and the quality of education vital (Ross & Mählck, 1990). Fortunately, in Oman, considerable progress is being made in strengthening these areas. There is now a strong information system, linking schools and the Ministry, while a new performance indicator system is in place, relating to school management. These need to be tied in with a quality policy.

The general way forwards in terms of establishing quality practices is to create a driving force. The driving force normally comes from pressure of customers or initiative from top management (Al-Zamany et al., 2002). In the case of Oman, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education provides the driving force by establishing a department for quality assurance within the ministry headquarters. This department could study the current situation and develop a policy that ensures quality in schools; initiating new approaches as appropriate to tackle the situation.

Various suggestions made by questionnaire respondents to raise the quality of the current education system included the following:

- Reduce class size
- Reduce the number of competitions and extra-curricular activities
- Reduce the workload of teachers
- Provide more training courses for all school staff
- Integrate the elements of TQM into the curriculum
- Implement an accountability system
- Consider the work and leisure needs of teachers
- Encourage educational research and school project initiatives

These suggestions are worthy of consideration within a TQM framework. In the absence of a national quality policy, it is extremely important to start creating a framework for quality in Oman. Further research is needed to determine the best ways of achieving this.

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