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Safety management in Catalonia's schools

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Abstract

The management of safety in schools is an essential aspect to guarantee the protection of all the students, teachers and other staff from the risk and hazards of the school environment. The whole school community plays an important role in school safety assurance, but it is the headmasters who are in charge of protection. Spain's school legislation establishes this responsibility, but no general function directly refers to the safety management. The purpose of this study is to identify and analyse the functions that the headmasters develop to guarantee the integrity of all users, in the context of the Catalan schools (Spain). The approach takes the shape of descriptive-inductive study, using data from documentary analysis, interviews with headmasters (n=14) and teachers (n=12) of fourteen public schools, and one focus group with experts (n=7) to discuss provisional findings. The outcomes show that all the headmasters recognise their responsibility and obligation in the assurance of safety and health to all the members of the school, but in opinion of some experts the responsibility is not fully assumed. The study concludes that, for an adequate safety management in schools, the following factors are absolutely necessary: enough administration support, increasing time and resources and improving the level staff training.

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1. Introduction

Safety is an aspect whose importance has been growing in the last few years in the social context, rising concern for prevention of situations that can be a danger for people. At the moment, certain safety conditions are being searched in all life scopes, conditions that relate to quality and welfare.

One of the scopes that claim for guaranteeing safety is the educational one. Children, young people, teachers and other staff spend a lot of their daily time in schools, places where there is a wide variety of risks and hazards (physical, as well as psychical and social), that may negatively affect their health and wellbeing.

In order to prevent danger situations in schools, safety conditions are to be regarded, in all of the aspects: the school physical environment (building, playgrounds, equipments and surroundings) and the social environment (quality of relationships) (CECC-UNICEF, 2008). Although the schools are classed with a low-risk level, since their activities focus on a specific period and the alert to danger situations is quickly informed for the high occupancy of the building during the teaching hours –because of the use of low-risk materials and equipments (Defensor del

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Pueblo Andaluz, 2003; Pérez, 2009)–, it is necessary to take preventive measures so as not to have to regret accidents.

With the strict application of educational and non-educational regulations are not enough; the prevention of risk and hazards in schools requires to integrate the management of safety in the usual tasks (Borrás, 2008; Leger, Young, Blanchard and Perry, 2010) in order to guarantee the protection of all the users of the education establishments.

Assuring a safe and healthy environment is a complex task that demands high attention from us (Longás, 2011; Mooney, Boss and Holoney, 2010), especially if we consider that this is a critical factor that influences academic outcomes and the integral education and development of students (Everett, Axelrad and Wattigney, 2007; Ferreira, Tschoepke, Toschoepke and De Albuquerque, 2005). Furthermore, if these study daily in a space in good physic condition, in a healthy environment where respect towards all the physic and social aspects are the basis of any activity, the development of the preventive culture is favoured (Burgos, 2010b).

Although the whole school community is in charge of the prevention (Ferreira, Tschoepke, Toschoepke and De Albuquerque, 2005, Longás, 2011), headmasters play a central role in this subject, given that they are the leaders and drivers of any school activity (Fernández, 2007). Along these lines, in this article we identify and analyse the safety management functions that the headmasters of the Catalan (Spanish) public schools develop to guarantee the integrity of all the school users, pointing out some suggestions for improvement.

2. Methodology

The nature of this research is descriptive-inductive, as the purpose of the study is to describe and understand the study object (Hernández, Fernández and Baptista, 2008). Specifically, the aims of the research are: first, analyzing the functions that the headmaster develops to guarantee safety and healthy environments and safeguard the physical and psychical of educational community; and, secondly, suggesting measures to improve the management safety in schools.

The methodology used is qualitative, focusing on three instruments for the data collecting: documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews and focus group. The documentary analysis consisted on searching and analyzing laws, regulations and other information about safety and security and the functions of headmasters. This analysis was used to establish semi-structured interviews with headmasters (n=14) and teachers (n=12) of fourteen public schools in Catalonia (3 preschools, 3 primary schools, 3 secondary schools, 3 professional training schools, 2 official language schools). Based on the results of the interviews, a preliminary document was elaborated and used to establish focus group with experts (n=7). This was composed by safety and prevention experts, personnel in charge of safety in schools and university lecturers.

The selection process of the sample was intentional, so as to select relevant subjects as an information source. The field study was developed from May to July 2010.

3. Results

3.1. Headmaster functions: regulations references

Headmasters of the Catalan (Spanish) schools are responsible for the protection of all school users from the risks and hazards, because they are the highest representatives of the Educational Administration in the schools. Students, teachers and other staff have the right to enjoy safety, healthy and accessibility conditions in schools; headmasters must pay attention to these conditions and constantly improve the prevention and protection standards.

Catalan (Spanish) school legislation (Organic Law of Education, 2006; Law of Education of Catalonia, 2009; Organic Regulation of public schools of Catalonia, 1996), does not explicitly refer to any function or task of safety management, but it is true that we can identify some of the headmaster functions with the creation of safety and healthy environments (CECC-UNICEF, 2008; Gavidia, 2001), if we think about the functions which must be undertaken by headmasters as regards safety (Table 1).

Table 1. Headmaster functions in the school legislation applicable to Catalonia in relation to aspects which must be taken into account by schools in order to create safety and healthy environments

Headmaster functions	Aspects for create safety and healthy environments
Guaranteeing the performance of the current laws.	Ensuring the current safety and healthy laws, adequately reacting in emergency situations.
Formalizing goods and services contracts: repairs, services and supplies; according to the current law and within the limits established by the Educational Administration.	Looking after the building and its installations. Controlling the services offered by external enterprises and organisms.
Ensuring the performance of school's Internal Rules of Procedure.	Promoting a correct use of the installations, resources and materials of the school by students and teachers.
Promoting cooperation at school. Ensuring harmony in interpersonal relationships. Guaranteeing the performance of the school code of behaviour and adopting appropriate disciplinary measures.	Creating a good learning environment.
Motivating cooperation among families, institutions and specific organisations, in order to facilitate the relation between schools and the environment.	Creating a participatory and dialogue atmosphere around the definition of procedures and strategies in order to prevent situations of risk, aggression and violence.
Encouraging cooperation of every educational community sector (parents' associations, students' associations, etc.).	Involving the whole school community, so that this takes on compromise with the safety of school and all of its members.
Formulating an initial School Educational Project, as well as its modifications and adaptations if necessary.	Include safety and health into school curriculum, making specific activities when will be necessary.
Ensuring preparation, development and assessment of the School Curriculum Project. Managing and coordinating school activities. Preparing the School General Planning.	

3.2. Management safety in schools: opinion of headmasters, teachers and experts

Headmasters, teachers and experts all consider that the responsibility for safety regarding the assurance of the school's safety belongs to the headship. This responsibility rises from the position that the headship holds and from the fact that it is the highest representative of the Educational Administration at the school. In the opinion of experts, headmasters should know how to use this responsibility, establishing the most appropriate organization of the resources within reach. On the other hand, headmasters claim that they try to fulfil their responsibilities and duties, by organizing school management, establishing tasks and functions –delegating some of this to other agents, principally to the Occupational Risk Prevention coordinator– and promoting performance and specific plans to guarantee everybody's safety.

In relation to this aspect, the tasks and functions that investigation informants link with management safety in schools are the following:

- Management of human relations. This function is only emphasized by preschool headmasters. In preschools there is a small teaching staff (between 6 and 8 teachers). Furthermore, headmasters of this kind consider that professional relations are fundamental for the correct development of the educational tasks.
- Management of material resources. This function is mainly emphasized by preschool headmasters. In this kind of schools it is very important that the school's furniture conforms to children's age. Yet, all schools of compulsory education also emphasize this management, highlighting the importance that all the furniture that children use is approved.
- Management of economic resources. Headmasters state that they must manage, either on their own or delegating it to other school staff, the school's financial resources. In secondary schools, professional training schools and official language schools, many of these resources are spent on hiring maintenance companies. All headmasters say that they do not often have enough resources to meet safety demands.
- Document management. Headmasters declare that they must ensure custody for documents related to maintenance of installations, authorizations, and all of the documents which contain any reference or personal data about students, teachers and school staff.

- Building and installation maintenance. In preschools and primary schools, the responsibility for the maintenance of the building and its installations belongs to the Educational Administration, whereas headmasters of these schools are in charge of merely supervising this process. The schools belonging to other levels have maintenance staff that carry out the general tasks of supervision and repairs; in this case, the headmaster is only in charge of supervising repairs and hiring the needed companies so that they carry out the tasks which are not up to the internal staff. In all of the cases, headmaster says that control and register all actions.
- Contingency and anomaly management. Day to day in schools unforeseen situations come forward. Headmasters should be able to manage these quickly in order to restore normality in the school. Much of these contingencies are linked to the school safety and security (installation breakdowns, material repairs, floods, etc.).
- Emergency Plan preparation and fire drill execution. They both are processes which are completely established in schools. With the exception of preschools, in the schools of the remaining levels the role rising from the obligation of preparing an Emergency Plan and executing periodical fire drills falls on one teacher, generally the Occupational Risk Prevention coordinator. Headmasters only control the correct development of these tasks.

The previous tasks and functions that have been remarked by informants are, in most cases, functions directly linked to the school public regulations on general organization and management. The interviewed teachers constantly emphasized the tasks and activities related to building and installation maintenance, material maintenance, Emergency Plan preparation and fire drill execution.

Depending on the organizational structure adopted by the school and the degree of support coming from the Educational Administration, the previously remarked tasks and functions are developed by different agents: headmasters, Occupational Risk Prevention coordinators, teachers, staff maintenance, Educational Administration, etc. Also, in the participating schools, the degree of involvement in safety management matters largely depends on the sensitivity and concern that the headmaster shows towards this subject.

4. Conclusions and some suggestions for improvement

Analyzing the applicable school legislation from the point of view of security has proved that, although this does not explicitly refer to any function or task about security management to be developed by the headmaster, the headship has very important functions in the creation of safety and healthy environments: it represents the school and the Educational Administration, it exerts the pedagogical direction, coordinates and manages all the school activities, guarantees the performance of the current law, motivates participation, acts as the staff manager and formalizes goods and service contracts (repairs, services and supplies), functions which are strongly related to leadership and school's organization and management.

The outcomes show that safety management is not fully assumed and integrated in the school management processes, although headmasters claim to assume their responsibility in this area. Most schools, except professional training schools that have technical safety staff, do not have a real plan of preventive activities (excepting the Emergency Plan, which all schools have). Also, risk evaluation processes are not boosted, so that prevention activities are punctual and an integral preventive approach is not taken.

In order to obtain a lasting improvement of school safety, it is necessary to take an integral preventive approach, by improving the safety management that schools carry out and emphasizing, fundamentally, headship role, since, as Martínez (2003) sets out, the headmaster is responsible for the school's organization and general development.

Headmasters must get actively involved in preventive maintenance, safety and health surveillance and raising awareness in all of the educational community towards the security area, being responsible for the implementation of arrangements for risk prevention (Petal, 2008). It is important for headmasters to be prone to have a bearing on this area, because, without their active role, the other agents will find it difficult to get involved in safety. Many schools are motivated and develop many activities, but these are not institutionalized. In order to make these activities more successful and enduring in time, headmasters' implication is necessary (Longás and Martorell,

2005).

To make this possible, the Educational Administration needs to strengthen the introduction of prevention culture in schools (Burgos, 2010a) and ensure that all headmasters are involved in safety, by establishing safety management as an extra management task and function that must be assumed, aspect with which also Woycikowska agrees (2008).

On the other hand, in order to improve management processes, it is essential to progressively modify the current concept of security, going from the normative conception to a cultural conception, introducing the safety in values, norms and organizational and performance dynamics.

Also, in order to improve safety management at schools the following factors are absolutely necessary:

- Achieving enough and permanent support from the Educational Administration, increasing human, material and economic resources that are currently assigned to schools, taking the highest profit from the already existing ones.
- Improving the level of headmasters' training, establishing the obligation for them to be trained in initial safety and prevention concepts and activities before reaching the position, including also aspects about prevention, safety and health in the initial teachers' training. This aspect is stated in Vilnius Resolution (2009).
- Preparing integral Prevention Plans according to rigorous security evaluations. As Gairín and Castro (2010) state, aspects concerning security must be kept in institutional documents, because, without a correct formalization of these, it is complicated to correctly control and monitor their management.
- Establishing spaces and times for the planning and development of preventive activities and coordinating all agents involved in risk prevention that, ultimately, include us all.

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