

USING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL MARKETING

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Abstract: *To achieve a competitive school, it is necessary that this should always be connected to the environment, education market and beneficiaries. Information is a necessary condition, one of the primary resources to scientifically substantiate strategic planning. The research process is indispensable for the scientific substantiation of decisions, reducing uncertainty issues. It provides information about educational service users, their behaviour and the environment, absolutely necessary for designing and implementing future plans and strategies.*

Key words: *qualitative research, educational marketing, focus group, market education, strategic planning.*

1. Introduction

The educational market research is an activity through which, by means of concepts, methods and specific techniques of investigation, the systematic specification, measurement, collection, analysis and objective interpretation of information for school management is carried out, in order to know the environment in which it functions, identifying opportunities, evaluating alternatives of school actions and their impacts.

Depending on the data supplied, the research in social and behavioural sciences is divided into two broad categories: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative research involves obtaining responses from a small number of respondents and the results are qualitative-style: ideas, perceptions, feelings, associated values, reasons, preferences, suggestions.

The results of these studies serve mainly

to improve the educational offer in accordance with the requirements coming from students, parents and labour beneficiaries.

2. Quality research of the educational market - premise to support strategic decisions

Qualitative research is an investigation with different levels of complexity, designed to identify, clarify and define what is relevant, significant and important for a problem, opportunity or context. It allows a deeper understanding of concepts and of the essence of phenomena and processes considered. Qualitative research is placed more in the “context of discovery” than in the “context of verification”. The information brought by qualitative research may highlight novel practices and behaviour, forms of social organization less or not known, new ways

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of thinking and interpreting various social or psychosocial processes.

Qualitative research is carried out at the initial stage of studying a problem, its main purpose being to clarify the nature of this problem and provide qualitative information. The main types of objectives of this research are: outlining the main aspects of the problem and diagnosing the situation, identify hypotheses for further descriptive or causal research, exploring motives, attitudes and values, testing the product or advertising concepts, identifying options and their analysis, identifying new ideas for products or services or improving the existing ones.

There are several tools of qualitative research. Selection questionnaires refer to appointing subjects who will participate in qualitative research, in close relation to the purpose / objectives pursued. The clear statement of purpose / objectives is vital to the success of all research.

The conversation guide aims to introduce the necessary topics, whose approach contributes to the achievement of the qualitative research purpose. Developing the conversational guide is very laborious. This should be based on a very good knowledge not only of the market characteristics, but also of cultural, behavioural, social, political aspects.

The selection and training of operators and moderators is also an important aspect of qualitative research. For this goal, in practice, people with various levels of training, qualifications and experience are needed. Generally, operators and moderators working to achieve qualitative research are formed with difficulty, their training being a painstaking and lengthy process.

The analysis and interpretation of qualitative research data can be achieved by a well known technique, i.e. the content analysis. The content analysis is a set of research techniques to study the method of

communication, considering that the systematic and objective procedures used to describe messages lead to obtaining indicators that allow the inference of knowledge given the conditions of production and reception of these messages.

The summary report is presented to the beneficiaries of the study. The reliability of measurements and conclusions based on them will depend on the representative degree of the sample population which was the subject of the research.

In school, the management team can use the data obtained to substantiate strategic decisions. Strategic planning is a rational process that can and should be used and modified by school managers. Strategy facilitates the setting of a uniform way for schools in terms of their operational objectives and provides the necessary resource allocation to guide the school to achieve these objectives.

Schools make use of qualitative research to substantiate their strategic decisions. Such a research study was conducted in a special education institution in Brasov, which provides education for students with special needs. The services offered by this institution are: specialized education, according to the type and degree of disability; support educational services for students with special educational needs in mainstream schools through support teachers, comprehensive and integrated educational therapy, language disorders therapy; psychodiagnosis, counselling and specific therapies, physical therapy, motility education; play therapy and psycho stimulation; pre-professional activities, information and counselling for parents.

To improve the quality of education and foster education, a focus-group qualitative research study was conducted on "Teachers/parents' opinions, attitudes and behaviours regarding the school's service

offerings". This research method was chosen because the focus group discussions are characterized by great flexibility, generating new ideas, while answers to questions are spontaneous and less conventional.

The research aimed at achieving the following objectives: to identify how school meets the needs of beneficiaries, to know the views of participants about school activities, to identify the school-family relationship, to identify the degree of satisfaction with the existing material in school, to establish the significance of partnerships and community relationship, identifying new ways of improving the school offer.

The research aimed at two groups, one of which consisted of teachers working in the school, and the second one of parents and legal carers of school students. The sampling was performed using the existing database in the school, applying a search algorithm previously established. For sample preparation, the systematic random method was used and the mechanical step (statistic) was "from 6 to 6 people", the population considered consisting of teachers / parents and legal carers of pupils.

Given the amount, but especially the quality of the answers retrieved, it can be said that the focus group achieved the intended objectives. As the participants in the discussions had different professions or were parents of the children who study in the school, it is considered that the representative group was provided and the responses received from all 10 individuals of each group were sufficient, pointing at the achievement of the research, whose results are analyzed and interpreted in the final report of research.

The content of the interviews was analyzed using a scale developed from the study issues and based on the analysis objective. The information obtained by a

focus group discussion was subjected to a content analysis. The content analysis is a technique used for collecting and organizing information in a format that allows researchers to make inferences about the characteristics and meaning of the messages. It can be developed by summarizing the information or calculating the frequency statements. More complex formats can be created to analyze trends and detect subtle differences in the intensity of information.

The data analysis was performed both for the first group and for the second one. There was a vertical analysis for each subject of the interview, and horizontally, for each topic discussed.

Given the results of qualitative research, it appears that both groups considered that school has an attractive educational offer, adapted to the needs of children with special educational needs. Educational and therapeutic activities taking place in the school are generally well organized. The first thing the school offers to the pupils with special educational needs is the opportunity to participate in activities tailored to their needs. Even if schedules are not flexible, it is possible to work differently and in accordance with the students' own pace. An advantage of special schools is that the class comprises only a few students.

The activities included in the school curriculum are chosen according to the children's needs and reflect the changes that are found in the society. The optional courses are close to what the recipients want. However, a greater emphasis should be put on cooking / working activities in the kitchen and initiating activities on the computer.

Extracurricular activities conducted in school are appreciated by students and parents. Other extracurricular activities that could be included at the core of the students' schedule would be participating

in organized activities outside the school, at the headquarters of educational partners, according to teachers, organizing parties for children celebrating their birthdays, hiking in nature to know the beauties of the area, according to parents. Parents participate in extracurricular activities organized by the school, especially in school festivities.

Supporting activities for children with special needs integrated into mainstream schools are not fully close to their real needs. There are a large number of integrated students subordinated to itinerant teachers, which makes the activities not very effective. Also, the individual work practice with these students is missing in some schools, teachers not having a suitable space to conduct the activities. Another problem would be that some itinerant teachers are not in ordinary in the school and do not have continuity within the department.

If the teachers participating in the focus group appreciated the activities of the school putting more emphasis on the teachers' methodological and scientific preparation, parents appreciate more the possibility that students can benefit from all services in good conditions, with teachers who are close to their students. One of the teachers' demands is a greater involvement of school psychologists in the class activities and counselling teachers. The school psychologists' work is less known by parents. They would like a larger number of children to benefit from therapy and counselling.

Most times, there are no barriers of communication between teachers and parents. Activities that involve students and parents are required so as to ensure the transparency of school activities.

Generally, the participants in the focus group are satisfied with the school facilities. Classes meet the needs of children with special educational needs in

terms of the equipment with furniture. There were some proposals to improve the school facilities by both groups, teachers placing more emphasis on teaching materials, textbooks and special books which are scarce, while for the parents, arranging the classes is more important. The teachers stressed the need to move to a larger building that would meet the current market requirements. Another necessity would be building a playground for children in the school yard.

Partnership activities are interesting and well known to parents. There is a need to diversify partner institutions: hospitals, churches, banks, trading companies. Parents proposed partnership activities with the Foundation "Crystal Children", which addresses children with autistic spectrum disorders, especially when the foundation organizes events involving school children. They also suggested that students' works to be exhibited in the halls of the Children's Hospital in Brasov. The activities should be promoted in the local community.

Promoting the institution is very important for attracting new students. Some parents of children with special needs do not know the school, not knowing what it offers in terms of school activities and facilities, do not know what the opportunities offered by the school are. For this reason, the study revealed the need for a school site with useful information that can be accessed. The role of itinerant teachers is very important, also, because they are the ones who advise parents in mainstream schools.

The participants in the first focus group believe that the school offer may be improved by the diversification of services:

- Stimulation of teachers who are involved in activities associated with achieving higher standards.

- Arrangement of two classes for students with autism.
 - Arrangement of two classes with kitchen furniture for household activities.
 - Library equipped with books from projects.
 - Building an attic for the existing building.
 - Diversification of partnerships.
 - Possibility for teachers to use care practices aimed at language disorders outside school hours, within additional activities with integrated students.
 - Arrangement of sheltered workshops for graduates with severe disabilities.
 - Modernization of the space for meal preparation and serving for the students.
 - Creating and ensuring the functionality of a server to facilitate communication between the centre and inclusive schools.
 - Equipping each class with computers and Internet network.
 - Purchasing the necessary equipment for the achievement of educational materials.
 - Creating a documentation and information centre for teachers in special education from Brasov.
- The amendments proposed by parents to improve the school quality are:
- Arrangement of sheltered workshops for graduates with severe disabilities in the school or outside it.
 - Purchasing a minibus to transport students, mainly children with walking impairments.
 - Organizing social activities and games during the summer holidays.
 - Improvement of school furniture;
 - Equipping classes with games and educational materials tailored to the needs of children.
 - Maintaining a collaboration and partnership relationship with parents.
 - Attracting parents in community activities.
 - Attracting parents in devising the necessary student materials.
 - Promoting the school activities in the community in Brasov.
- It is worth noting that both teachers and parents have made proposals for school services improvement. These are related to school facilities, diversification of services for children with severe disabilities who leave school, improving communication between departments, maintaining the collaboration and partnership relationship with parents, developing community partnerships and promoting the image of the school, accessing grant projects, developing educational projects.

3. Conclusions

The results of the focus group research underline the proposals for the development of the school. They go from the mission of the school, access to quality education for all children and youth with special needs in Brasov county, in order to integrate them academically, professionally and socially as well as possible, depending on their individual potential through educational support services, pedagogical and therapeutic-rehabilitation, based on the principle of the equalization of opportunities and the principle of education for all.

The outlined strategic goals are related to increasing the quality of education and therapeutic-recovery, developing human resource, fund raising and development of materials, developing community partnerships and promoting the image of the school, given the current competitive climate of decentralization and institutional autonomy.

If the existence of this special education institution is justified by the educational and community context, the education needs identified in society require, as a

strategic dimension, the achievement of a good quality education for students with special needs, for their social and professional integration. The school mission is to meet community needs through all activities.

In Romania, it may be noted that strategic planning in education has become a necessity. School organizations define targets in response to the educational needs of students, parents and to the labour market demands.

These aspects are reflected in the proposals to develop the special school in Brasov.

To have a competitive school, it is necessary that this should always be connected to the environment, education market and beneficiaries. Strategic development involves a continuous and systematic information flow as regards the internal and external environment of the school, a dynamic relationship with the outside.

Strategic planning is necessary and possible given the dynamic environment, which exhibits changes that are not neutral, but can act either as opportunities or as threats to the organization. Strategic

planning anticipates and capitalizes the change to the school's advantage, being responsive to environmental signals and able to provide solutions.

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