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**PEER LEARNING AS A WAY OF EFQM MODEL ASSIMILATION**  
**IN ARAB SCHOOLS**

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*Abstract*

The EFQM organizational quality and excellence model is implemented in selected schools of the Ministry of Education northern district. These schools are professionally tutored by qualified consultants for two years until receiving the excellence commitment certificate of the international EFQM and then they continue the assimilation process independently. During the assimilation, these schools embrace work mechanisms and methods as part of their work culture, aiming to assimilate the model values in their daily practice, turning the model into the main basis of their organizational culture. This paper focuses on ‘peer learning’ as a central method for the model assimilation in the implementing schools. It examines to what extent peer learning affects the EFQM assimilation in Arab schools from the management and teachers’ viewpoint. This paper presents qualitative research findings, based on semi-structured interviews of four principals, four quality coordinators and four focus groups consisting of teachers. The findings illustrate that in both the teachers and management’s viewpoint, the work method based on teachers’ peer learning is perceived as a meaningful way of EFQM assimilation at school. The teachers, principals and quality coordinators gave examples and elaborated on the meaning of teachers’ peer learning, help, discussions and discourse, that are based on the model values, and facilitate the EFQM consolidation in their organizational culture. The EFQM implementing schools are considered as precursors in the field. Thus, investigating the ‘peer learning’ assimilation method provides an important instrument for schools in particular and organizations in general, assisting in the model assimilation their organizations.

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**Keywords:** EFQM, change theories, peer learning, Arab society in Israel, excellence, education system.



## 1. Introduction

In our dynamic and changing age, organizations are required to renew themselves consistently, in order to remain relevant to the environment. The education system, considered as one of the organizations that establish society, is also obliged to undergo transformations, adapting itself to the changing dynamics. Organizations striving to maintain relevance, uniqueness and added value to their environment, must improve and renovate their work in a systematic and consistent manner. Hence, they must develop strategies and methods that promote these changes (Bowonder, Dambal, & Shirodkar, 2010). Education systems around the globe in general, and in Israel in particular, have embraced the quality and excellence perception offered by the European Excellence and Quality Model – EFQM – as a way of generating a change in their organizational work culture. Thus, they ensure their constant improvement processes (Grienberg & Simchon, 2017). Furthermore, schools, being also organizations, should build organizational infrastructure and work mechanisms that will ascertain a trend of continuous promotion of their practice and results. Based on this principle, thousands of schools in countries around the world have been assimilating the EFQM model schools, e.g. United States, Spain, Jordan, Egypt, Arab countries and others (European Foundation for Quality Management, 2010).

Similar to worldwide organizations from the private and public sectors, the northern district of the Israeli education system has set down in its vision the value of quality and excellence, emphasizing the issue of relevance to society and to the world. Consequently, it has adopted the quality and excellence language as an inseparable part of its organizational culture, based on the quality and excellence perception of the EFQM. In 2011, the model was introduced into the northern district of the Israeli education system. It has been gradually and systematically assimilated in the schools. Every two years, the Ministry of Education chooses 15 schools from the varied sectors (Arab, Jewish, religious, Bedouin and Druze). These schools undergo a 2-year process of assimilation, during which they perform a self-diagnosis, identify their strong points and the points that should be improved, based on the nine criteria of the model. After completing the process, the school are examined by authorized inspectors of the EFQM organization, who determine their level of commitment to the quality and excellence process. To date, 40 schools in the northern district have received the certificate of C2E1, i.e. the first stage of commitment to quality and excellence and five schools have been granted the C2E2 rank, namely they have completed the second stage.

The model uniqueness resides in the challenge it sets for the organizations, namely they have to examine themselves, check what is their level of excellence and what they should do in order to achieve a higher degree of quality and excellence. This is a thorough process that embodies a change of the existing situation. Hence, every organization adopts a way of coping with the change in accordance with its situation and available resources. This paper briefly reviews the ways by which the schools have assimilated the EFQM model, with the purpose of consolidating the change and institutionalizing it in their organization.

This paper is part of a doctoral thesis entitled: “The effect of the organizational excellence processes according to the EFQM model on the change of organizational culture in Arab sector schools in Israel”.

### **The EFQM model**

The EFQM model was initiated by 14 CEOs of various European organizations, who decided to make a breakthrough in the field of quality and excellence, becoming themselves the motivating force of sustainable excellence. The European Foundation for Quality Management was founded in 1989 as a non-profit association and it operated mainly in the private sector. At present, the EFQM system is functioning also in the public sector. It encompasses over 700 organizations in Europe and other continents, assisting more than 30,000 organizations in their quest for excellence (Woolley, 2006). According to the basic assumptions of the model, the knowledge needed for the improvement, is within the organization itself. Therefore, the model aims to direct the existing knowledge and practice under one managerial umbrella and create an organizational language and culture of continuous enhancement (Grienberg & Simchon, 2017).

The model consists of three key components:

- (1) The nine criteria and 32 sub-assertions that allow every organization to examine the enablers available to it: leadership, strategy, people, partnerships and resources and processes. This is performed in compliance with the organizational results: people results, customer results, society/community results and main business results (European Foundation for Quality Management, 2013). In fact, at its basis, the model comprises components that exist in every organization. However, it offers a renewed view of the existing situation, by creating a whole entirety, as well as interrelations between the 'enablers' and the 'designated results'. This stimulates the organization to identify and empower its strong points and promote the weak points.
- (2) The RADAR logic that assists the organization in examining itself by means of a structured and systematic result-oriented thinking (Grienberg & Simchon, 2017).
- (3) The eight values that trace in fact the way for every organization striving to assimilate the quality and excellence language. These are: adding value for the customers, creating a sustainable future, building partnerships, harnessing creativity and innovativeness, leading with vision, inspiration and integrity, managing by means of processes, succeeding through people's talent and sustaining outstanding results (European Foundation for Quality Management, 2013).

The schools that have been assimilating the model, have been undergoing an organized process, supported by a qualified topic consultant who accompanies the school with an intensive and continuous work. The consultant works with the school management as well as with the employees in a systematic and structured manner: learning the model language and principles, working by the improvement circle, the RADAR logic, etc. Moreover, these schools must have an organizational infrastructure that embodies a vision, active management team, workplan, etc. These terms enable the change process to transpire in the school organization.

### **Organizational culture theories**

Today, there is no conclusive definition of the term 'organizational culture'. The differences between numerous laws that have attempted to define this term, relate to the terms of outputs and process.

Furthermore, there is still no consensus about the starting point of the term ‘organizational culture’ (Meshulam & Harpaz, 2015).

For the purposes of this paper and analysis of the investigated issue, I will relate to the term ‘organizational culture’ according to two key models: the pyramid (iceberg) model conceived by Schein (2004) and the three circles model conceived by Raz (2004).

### ***The three circles model***

The three circles model, developed by Raz (2004), relates to the term ‘organizational culture’ by analyzing the interactions between the three cultures that surround the organization, that are categorized into three circles. The first circle is the managerial culture, manifested by the work norms guided by the organization management: policy, work mechanisms, regulations and so on. All these are reflected by the organizational artefacts. The second circle refers to the workplace culture, namely the way by which employees perceive the organization. The third circle is related to the organization surrounding culture and the effect thereof on its organizational culture. For example, the religious culture, behavioral norms and others (Raz, 2004). Each of these circles has an impact on the level of assimilation and way of implementing the EFQM language. This paper refers to the managerial circle on the one hand and to the workplace culture circle on the other. The second circle is reflected by the employees through the implementation method they have chosen in order to facilitate assimilation of the new organizational language.

### ***The pyramid (iceberg) model***

The pyramid (iceberg) model, conceived by Schein (2004), refers to the organizational culture by three layers. The first layer – artefacts – underscores the basic assumptions that are overt and accessible within the organization. They are manifested by the employees’ overt behavior in the organization, the ceremonies, symbols, etc. The second layer – values – relates to the more covert part, displayed by the norms that are consciously agreed by the employees. These norms become accepted and are reflected by the employees’ behavior. The third layer, positioned at the bottom of the pyramid, is the basic assumptions. This is the most covert layer, since it relates to the unconscious part of the organization perception, that has become the employees’ behavioral norms (Schein, 2004).

Assimilation of the EFQM model in organizations in general and in schools in particular concerns the three layers, their main impact depending on the organization needs, uniqueness, etc. This paper explores whether peer learning has an effect as one of the assimilation methods in all the layers and in which layer the effect is the most prominent.

### **Change processes theories**

Many researchers have perceived the topic of change as meaningful and important. These researchers have developed theories about change processes, change types, ways of assimilating changes in organizations in general and in schools in particular and so on. The present study underscores the effect of the type of change that assimilating schools are undergoing and the way they have embraced for consolidating and inculcating the change in their organizational culture.

Levy and Merry (1986) discussed change types, such as: longitudinal, latitudinal, quantitative, qualitative and so on. On the other hand, Argyris and Schon (1978) related to change in according with its level of impact, classifying the change into two levels. The first is a change of the first degree that is simpler, applies generally to the values and behavioural norms. Such a change does not undermine the current situation but rather generates a change in it. Conversely, a change of the second degree is deeper, generating a thorough change in the current situation, undermining it and creating a new reality in the existing organization.

Numerous researchers have developed approaches and models of change assimilation at all levels. For the purpose of the present study, I have decided to apply the field theory model, developed by Levin (as cited in Kotter, 1990). This model facilitates identification of the inhibitors that might hinder the assimilation of the desired change and the enablers that facilitate the assimilation, even before the beginning of the process. Levin highlighted the need for empowering the enablers and weakening the inhibitor, in order to promote the change assimilation process (as cited in Kotter, 1990). Referring specifically to the assimilation of change in the school organization, Wheatley (2001) discusses in her theory the assimilation of change through people in the organization. She argues that the real change transpires only when the employees at school (teachers) start experiencing the change, talk about it, and share with others what is happening to them. Conducting a discourse between the teachers attests to the beginning of the change assimilation and implementation in the school organizational culture. Wheatley (2001) emphasizes the importance of the school management's role in encouraging this open discourse between the employees. Her theory provides an empirical basis for the argument of the present study, indicating peer learning as a way of assimilating the quality and excellence model – EFQM – in assimilating schools.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The main argument of the present study is that peer learning is considered as a structured method that assists Arab sector assimilating schools in assimilating the EFQM language in their practice, turning this language into part of their work culture. This is grounded in the viewpoint of the principals and quality coordinators on the one hand, and of the teachers on the other

## **3. Research Questions**

- 3.1. What is the contribution of peer learning as a way of assimilating the EFQM model in Arab schools?
- 3.2. Is there a change in the contribution of peer learning from the viewpoint of the school management as compared to the viewpoint of the teachers?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

- 4.1. To explore the contribution of peer learning to the assimilation of the EFQM model in Arab schools

- 4.2. To examine the viewpoint of the school management in comparison with the viewpoint of the teachers regarding the contribution of peer learning to the assimilation of the EFQM model in Arab schools.

## 5. Research Methods

The present study is conducted according to the qualitative research approach since it explores the topic by the participants' subjective perception, comparing the various viewpoints of those participants (Pistrang & Barker, 2012).

### Research instruments:

For the purpose of conducting the present study, two main research instruments were applied: (a) semi-structured interviews of the principals and quality coordinators; and (b) focus groups consisting of teachers

### Research population:

The present study focused on four Arab sector schools that had assimilated the EFQM method and the research population consisted of 20 interviewees. Table 01 presents the research population.

**Table 01.** The research population

Position	Gender	Age	School	Education
4 principals	6 – male	Between 20-30: 1	Primary – 8	BA – 9
4 quality coordinators	14 - female	Between 30-40: 15	Junior high school – 6	MA – 11
12 teachers		Between 40-50: 3	High school – 6	
		Between 50-60: 1		

### Data analysis method

For the purpose of data analysis, the researcher has adopted the categorization method, classifying the data from the transcriptions according to categories with meanings that are common and relevant to the research questions (Arksey & Knight, 1999). This method was implemented in two main stages. At the first stage, the researcher classified the data and, at the second, she connected the data that belonged to the same group (Shkedi, 2014). This process facilitated identification of additional meanings and enhanced the research participants' viewpoints regarding peer learning as a way of assimilating the E.F.Q.M. model.

## 6. Findings

The data were collected from the semi-structured interviews with the assimilating schools principals and quality coordinators on the one hand, and the focus groups of randomly chosen teachers on the other. The content analysis of the data illustrates that peer learning is perceived as a structured and systematic way of assimilating the EFQM in the assimilating Arab sector schools. Table 02 below presents and

compares the two points of view significantly and clearly, through themes and categories that represent examples of quotations from the interviews and the focus groups.

**Table 02.** Themes and Categories

<b>Theme</b>	An initiated and structured assimilation method
<b>Category</b>	Peer learning
<b>Principals</b>	<p>The chairpersons of the teams that were integrated and led the process when we started the EFQM assimilation, support the teachers who will lead a certain team in the improvement of a specific topic”. <b>Supporting the change-leading teachers</b></p> <p>“What I am going to do is that those teachers who are familiar with the model, will expand their knowledge slowly by means of organized meetings with the other teachers who were less involved”. <b>Dissemination by a fan method</b></p> <p>“The quality coordinators and the chairpersons that were more involved will present cases and problems later in the year and will demonstrate to the teachers how things can be handled by means of the EFQM language and thus, assimilate all the instruments that we have already learnt”. <b>Demonstration</b></p>
<b>Quality coordinators</b>	<p>“We conduct open conversations with the teachers, give examples, explain the benefit of the model to the staff and thus create an instructive discourse among the teachers”. <b>Open and instructive discourse</b></p> <p>“We demand from the teachers a new way of conduct, new terms and new way of thinking to which they have not been accustomed before. So, the very change at school requires investment, mutual learning”. <b>Mutual learning</b></p> <p>“We always have teachers who object and our aspiration is to involve the teachers so that they demonstrate less objection, be partners, one helps the other, listen to other people’s difficulties, shares...”. <b>Teachers’ involvement in the change</b></p> <p>“I don’t think that today there are teachers who object and do not want to cooperate in this issue. But there was exhaustion that affected. Now things have settled down and teachers started collaborating with each other, speak with the same terms. We as the management support this and try promoting it”. <b>Moderation of objections</b></p> <p>“We have talented people who want to change. We identified these people, recruited them and they led the process together with us. They help other teachers, talk with them, try solving problems”. <b>Problem solution</b></p>
<b>Teachers</b>	<p>“Always during talks with colleagues, teachers indicate what should be improved, how to improve”. <b>Teachers’ conversations</b></p> <p>“<b>The teachers want to help, they care about the others</b>”“I think that this is assimilated more among those who were involved. They continue because they have already internalized all the language, the thinking, everything. Therefore, I think it is important that these teachers help other teachers to understand and learn the model better”. <b>Developing a school language of change</b></p> <p>“There is more collaboration in the teams, more discourse about the model. That is something more human. If you see how the teachers act, then yes, there is a big change and it helps us a lot to understand the new language”.          “It greatly helps us when we talk about it with our colleagues. Thus, things seem simpler and more understandable, less demanding and difficult”.</p>

- 6.1. The examples presented by the principals, quality coordinators and the focus group teachers illustrate that peer learning, teachers' collaboration and mutual learning constitute a structured and important method for helping teachers understand the EFQM language and assimilate it in their daily practice
- 6.2. The principals' point of view shows that peer learning is a fan method dissemination, i.e. teachers support other teachers and help assimilating the change by presenting various examples and issues.
- 6.3. The quality coordinators emphasize peer learning as a way that facilitates moderation of objections, increased teachers' involvement, presentation of problem-solution examples according to the EFQM language.
- 6.4. Teachers underscore the importance of the open discourse as a way of developing and assimilating the change process in their school.

## **7. Conclusion**

Based on the findings, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- 7.1. The investigated schools have adopted a new work culture that is grounded in the peer learning method as a way of consolidating the change and assimilating the new language according to the EFQM model. "The quality coordinator and the chairpersons that were more involved will present cases and problems later in the year and will demonstrate to the teachers how things can be handled by means of the EFQM language and thus, assimilate all the instruments that we have already learnt". This is associated with one of the basic points of the model, namely that organizations should continuously develop organizational infrastructure and new work mechanisms in order to ensure constant improvement and achievement of desirable results (European Foundation for Quality Management EFQM, 2010).
- 7.2. The EFQM model encompasses a change process for the schools that have decided to implement it. This change involves re-thinking about the existing situation, identifying points to be improved and empowering points of strength. On the one hand, the change can comprise a deeper layer of change of the second degree by amending the perception, the result-oriented thinking of the RADAR logic. On the other, the change can be of the first degree, relate to behaviours, and work norms (Argyris & Schon, 1978). In fact, the participants of the present study pointed out a significant change of the first degree, manifested by adopting new behavioural norms. "There is more collaboration in the teams, more discourse about the model. That is something more human. If you see how the teachers act, then yes, there is a big change and it helps us a lot to understand the new language
- 7.3. The investigated schools developed a new work method resulted from the change in the organizational culture in two circles of the three circles model, conceived by Raz (2004). This brought about an interrelation between the managerial culture circle that, on the one hand,



cultivated and initiated a school-based policy that empowered and encouraged peer learning. On the other hand, the workplace culture circle was also illustrated by the teachers' viewpoint as a culture based on mutual learning and listening.

- 7.4. The change in the organizational culture of the investigated schools according to the pyramid (iceberg) model (Schein, 2004), the research shows that embracing the peer learning method generated a major change at the first layer, artefacts. Thus, an overt change is demonstrated by the behaviour of the teachers, who have started sharing more, listening to each other and helping, and it shows changes at the second layer, values, whereby the change is less overt, e.g. the value of constant improvement. "Always during talks with colleagues, teachers indicate what should be improved, how to improve". The value of mutual help and caring for one's colleagues
- 7.5. Peer learning is perceived as an assimilation method both from the viewpoints of the management and of the employees.
- 7.6. The success of this method is grounded in the principle that leading a change and the success thereof relies more on the human capital that leads the change (Wheatley, 2001).
- 7.7. In order to succeed in introducing a change in schools in particular and in organizations in general, it is important to identify and empower the enablers that can promote the change as well as identify the inhibitors and address them (Kotter, 1990).
- 7.8. Mutual learning among the teachers and discussions about daily issues facilitate and promote the comprehension of the model values and its assimilation in practice, turning it the model into an inseparable part of the school organizational culture.

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