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How Actors Of Local Society (Community) Influence The Development Of Decentralized General Education, And Their Attitude To It.

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Abstract

One of the most urgent problems is to find ways to involve local society in the development of general education in municipalities. One of the solutions is to increase the influence of local society on the decision-making processes of municipalities. The aim of the research is to find out the role of local society groups – students, their parents and principals – in the decision-making process, and their influence on the development of decentralized general education. The opinions of different actor groups are compared in order to find out their attitude to the decentralization processes of general education promoted by the LEA, and analyse the possible factors that influence the actor groups in the administrative decision-making processes which are used in the development of the LEA's policy and strategies.Quantitative and qualitative data collection methods are used – polls and profound interviews. The approach of the actor network theory is used in the research, which gives an opportunity to create an actor network for the decentralization process of general education. The most important actor groups in the process of decentralization have been identified. The results of the research show that in order to achieve the goals of development of general education, it is necessary to estimate the optimal degree of decentralization of educational management. The results of the research also show that sociological research gives substantial support to the planning of the development of general education towards decentralization and the achievement of the set aims.

Keywords: Decentralization, sociology, education management;

1. Introduction

Problem Statement: Each system including education has a definite management system oriented either towards decentralization or centralization each of them having their positive or negative aspects.
One of the most urgent problems concerns the ways of involving local society in the development of general

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education in municipalities. A potential solution could be the increase of the influence of local actor groups on the decision-making processes in municipalities.

The need for decentralization has been stressed also by Pierre Bourdieu who held the view that besides the development of economic processes society was an important actor in the decentralization process participating in decision-making both directly and indirectly through actors who in their stead influence society.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the research is to find out the role and influence of municipal society groups –students, teachers, parents and school principals – in the decentralized decision-making process.

Methods: In order to obtain reliable information, qualitative and quantitative data collection methods have been used in the research. The quantitative data collection method helped to analyse the problem in quantifiable terms and obtain statistically valid and usable information, while the qualitative data collection method allowed to provide comprehensive analysis of the decision-making process in the municipality, the activities of the actors and the general problems of educational decentralization.

Findings and results: The views of various actor groups in municipal society have been compared in the research and the main attitudes of these actor groups towards decentralization in general education have been highlighted as well as their potential impact on the decisions of the administration have been analysed. The results and findings of the analysis can be used in the development of municipal educational policy and strategy as well as in further research of the problem. The results of the research allow us to make the conclusion that the main actor groups – the students, their parents, the teachers and the school principals – support decentralized management of general education in municipalities and their growing influence in it.

2. Guidelines for decentralized development of general education in Latvia

At present, one of the most urgent problems in Latvia is the degree of school autonomy and the possibility of students and their parents to choose a definite school for studies. Schools are fully autonomous with respect to the use of public funds within the framework of their budgets and according to the rules laid down by their founders. At the same time, the municipalities who provide the funding for schools, have a problem: They have built and accredited schools, they provide the wages for teachers, but the laws and regulations of the State give the right to parents to freely choose the school for their children. As a result, in some municipalities schools do not have enough students but in some other municipalities they are overcrowded. It is one of the risks of the decentralization of general education in Latvia. However, it is a sign of democracy, a sign that the decentralization of general education guarantees equal rights to every individual wherever he/she lives –in small or big municipalities, in the centre or the outskirts.

2.1. Aspects characterizing the development of general education

Education has a procedural, instructional, result providing and socially important character. The German educationalist professor Herbert Gudjons says that education at the turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries has many tasks and functions:

- it has the ability for reasonable self-determination and for solidarity with other people'
- it fosters the development of an individual in an environment objectively reflecting the accumulated culture of humanity: education always involves the relationships of man and the world, which means not only receptive but also productive participation in the cultural processes;
- it has individual and social features;
- education should be generally acceptable, i.e., education should suit all people;
- it is comprehensive from the moral, cognitive, aesthetic and practical aspects.

Education as a process is oriented towards the cognition of man's, nature's and society's many-sidedness and unity, towards the development of a humane, free and responsible personality.

Latvia's accession to the European Union as well as the globalization processes necessitate life-long learning, which ensures and develops man's competitiveness in the labour market. Significantly, man's education, his knowledge and intelligence are considered the decisive factors of economic growth in Latvia.

Various sociological theories in the world have different approaches to the value, significance, need, and applicability of education:

- The aim of education is at the basis of the first approach, and it has been defined as the normative ideal of an educated person. Education has relevance to all spheres of life, yet it is determined by a concrete historical period. Karl Mannheim has said that the aim of education is determined not only by a definite age but also by the country in which it develops. Thus, the strategies of the development of education can be evaluated by its normative objectives. For example, in Athens and Sparta, the main objective of education was the development of a skilled person (in Sparta that of a military man, in Athens an orator).

- The second approach places culture at the basis of educational strategy and development. The proponents of this approach are Mead, Simon, Kumbs and Ilyin. They hold the view that the development of civilization is determined by the change of the dominant cultural types which cause also changes in education as the translator of culture.

- The third – the institutional approach – is based on the stages of institutionalization of the educational system. Priority has been given to the normative or State determined education (Durkheim, Manheim) Education is considered to be a system capable of influencing the new generation and aimed at adapting it to the needs of society. The content of education is closely connected with the needs and requirements of the State. For a long time this approach was the dominant one also in the educational system of Latvia.

- The fourth approach – the personal approach – is existential in nature (I. Kant, M. Heidegger). The basic idea of this approach is that education is social activity oriented towards the development of each individual's best abilities (Report of the Strategic Committee, 2007., p. 79-80).

2.2. Parties involved in the decentralization processes

Decentralization of general education in a municipality can be influenced by any actor or group of actors. Actors may convey their attitude individually (students, parents, teachers) or as members of various interest groups (the parents' council, youth council, methods council). Actors may be members of various institutions (school or municipal council, education authority (department)). Actors may be divided into those who have been granted the right or duty by the laws and regulations to influence the development of general education including decentralization (mandatory commitments) and actors who may participate and influence the development of general education and decentralization voluntarily (voluntary commitments).

2.3. Use of Actor Network theory

The actor network theory has been developed in the works of B. Latour, P. Sztompka, C. Wasserman, M. Archer, A, Giddens, J. Habermas, and M. Castells.

"Communities do not exist without networks" (2008). Traditionally, "communities" are defined as groups in which individuals, usually living at one and the same geographic place, are mutually connected or organized around common values.

The importance of the network approach in the analysis of development in education is related to the advance of network society (Van Dijk, 2006; Castells, 1996; Urry, 2003) and knowledge economy. Any society consists of multi-layered networks, which cross, overlap and interact in myriad ways – on the physical and technical level (transport, telecommunications networks), the social level (family, community networks), the political and economic level (financial and commercial networks), as well as cultural, organizational and other levels. Bruno Latour considers that the term "network" is so vague and indeterminate that we have to give it up (Latour, 2005).

Several social theories analyze the network character of social processes:

cf. the role of networks in economic processes (Granovetter, 1973, 1983); the theory of the strategic niche (Kemp et al., 1998; Hoogma et al., 2002), a.o. Though each of these theories has its own subject matter and analyses networks of different scales, all of them stress the importance of actor cooperation in development processes, including the development of general education.

The actor network for the decentralization of general education in municipalities consists mainly of students, their parents, teachers, school principals and representatives of some other institutions.

In this system, the students are connected to and receive information from the actors of both institutions – the school and the family – whose attitudes often do not coincide.

The attitudes of the actors may differ also from the point of view of the group they represent. They depend to a great extent on the actor's knowledge, the information at his/her disposal and his/her interest in the matter at hand.

2.4. Main results of the research

In order to analyse the results of the research systematically, the analysis was structured according to the decentralization indicators of general education, which were divided into four aspects: organization of studies, staff management, planning and structure, and school resources. The data obtained in the research served for the assessment of the decentralization process in the management of general education in municipalities as well as for defining the role and impact of actor groups of municipal society in the planning and implementation of decentralized general education. The opinion polls and interviews conducted gave the possibility to find out the actor group views on their role and importance in the management of decentralized general education.

The results obtained can be divided into three categories:
- Assessment of the municipal decentralization process of general education by the actor group of the municipal decentralization network;
- Assessment of separate aspects of the decentralization process by the actor groups of the municipal decentralization network:
  a) Organization of the study process;
  b) Staff management;
  c) Planning and structure;
  d) Resources.
- Assessment of the impact of the actor group of the municipal decentralization network on the decentralization of the general education processes.

Analysis of the results of the first category revealed that on the whole all actor groups who participated in the poll are satisfied with the way schools work, it does not satisfy only 10 % of school management and 7 % of teachers.

The school principals have mostly expressed the view that decision-making at school has increased, and given concrete examples: the teachers have to take independent decisions on all issues related to the subject they are teaching, to educational work in the class, and the assessment of the students' learning achievements. The school principals stress that the amount of decision –making has increased due to decentralization in elaborating the curricula, which lends greater weight to the teacher's role as a pedagogue, his/her influence on and contribution to educating the students. The choice of the teaching methods and the use of the teaching aids during the lessons have also been left to the discretion of the teachers.

In the course of the decentralization process, the problem of school autonomy is being discussed every year in Latvia. The idea is mostly supported by larger schools having 400 and more students but opposed by the small schools, since school autonomy is based on autonomous management of the resources which the school has, and the resources of small schools are rather limited. The results of the research reveal the fact that none of the actor groups is convinced of the benefits of school autonomy and the loss of municipal participation. It testifies to the cautious attitude of the respondents to full school autonomy. A significant part of students' parents (43 %) do not support, partly or fully, the decentralization of general education management at school level.

The survey of the results of the second category has been arranged according to the aforementioned indicator aspects:

Organization of the study process: Article 57 of the Education Law gives the right to the parents to choose the school for their children. The results of the research reveal support to the current situation in Latvia under which the parents together with the child choose the school, though the regulative framework gives the right to choose the school only to the child's parents.

The duration of the school year is determined in a centralized way and this order has been supported by the representatives of most actor groups, though lately there is a tendency on the part of the students (24 %) and school councils (19 %) to support the right of the school itself to determine the length of the school year which means

decentralization in this respect.

In relation to the choice of textbooks and the content of the study programmes most actor groups support the current arrangement under which the teacher takes the decision on these issues. However, there is also a tendency among the representatives of school councils and the parents to support the view that the textbooks and study programmes should be chosen in a centralized way and apply to all schools in the country.

Staff management indicators show that the current order of the municipalities taking decisions on the teachers' salaries satisfies the parents (44 %), but 62 % of teachers consider that their salary should be determined in a centralized and unified way in the whole country.

The third aspect – planning and structure – concerns decision-making on the issues of implementing the school curriculum and its monitoring. The school administration (77 %) and the teachers (69 %) support the current situation in which the school itself takes the decision on the choice of the school curriculum, whereas the parents and the representatives of the school councils (54 %) consider that these issues should be decided at the level of the State.

The fourth aspect – the resources – involves issues of school funding from the State budget. Most actor groups support the current model under which the funding for schools is calculated in a centralized way and granted to the municipalities in accordance with the number of students at the schools of the municipality. The municipalities take decisions on the allocation of funding to the schools. This model is mainly supported by the representatives of school councils. The students and the teachers support a model according to which the funding is allocated to schools by the State in a centralized way but the representatives of school administration and the students' parents support decentralization, under which the funding is broken down within the budgetary resources by the school itself.

The research results of the third category and the impact assessment of the actor group of the municipal decentralization network reveal that mainly the school administration, the teachers and the school representatives tend to get involved in the self-assessment of the work of the school as well as in the decision-making process. The main problem lies in the difficulty of getting other actor groups involved in the self-assessment and the decision-making process. Only 20 % of students and 7 % of parents consider that they have been involved in assessing the work of the school and that their opinion has been taken into account. 51 % of parents and 42 % of students have been only informed of such a possibility.

The results of the research demonstrate the support of all actor groups (88 %) to the decentralization of the decision-making process.

The application of the actor network theory in the research offered the opportunity to develop an actor network for the decentralization of general education in the municipalities and identify the most important actor groups – the teachers, students, parents and the representatives of school administration.

3. Conclusions

- The results of the research testify to the fact that the actor groups hold the view that the current traditional teaching model is not sufficient for obtaining high quality education which answers the requirements of the present day and has adequate financial resources. The greatest support to the reform process has been expressed by the school administration and the students. However, we cannot overlook the fact that 23 % of actors consider the reforms unnecessary, and this amount is equal to the amount of those actors who are fully satisfied with the way schools work (22 %). Often proposals are made to increase the funding for schools, to teach more foreign languages and to reconsider the efficiency of using exercise books. Most of the proposals, except the provision of the financial resources, are within the competence of the schools or the teachers themselves.

- One of the indicators characterizing the level of decentralization of general education in the municipalities is the activity of the actor groups involved in the general education process and their conviction that their opinion is taken into account in the decision-making process.

- There are problems with involving other actor groups in assessing the work of the school and their impact on the decision-making at school since only 20 % of students and 7 % of their parents consider that they

have been involved and their opinion taken into account in assessing the work of the relevant school. 51 % of parents and 42 % of students have been only informed of such a possibility.
- All actor groups support (88 %) the decentralization of the decision-making process.
- The research has proved that sociological studies are an important factor in planning the development of general education by the municipalities and promoting the objectives of decentralization.
- The results of the research reveal the parents' unwillingness to entrust the decisions on the content of the study programmes and the choice of textbooks to the teachers.

4. Proposals

- In order to meet the development objectives of general education in the municipalities an optimum level of administrative decentralization must be found.
- To the LEAs – to find an opportunity to listen to the teachers', students' and their parents' opinions and suggestions, and take them into account when forming the local municipality's general education development policy.

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