

ASPECTS OF DECENTRALIZATION IN MANAGEMENT REFORMS OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN LITHUANIA

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The article probes into factors that determine processes of decentralization in managing the general education system. The study entails a review of pertinent literature and an analysis of the distribution of powers among entities managing the general education system in Lithuania. The study concludes that the education management system in Lithuania is gradually being decentralized and de-concentrated on the basis of the subsidiarity principle. A successful implementation of the decentralization reform requires the following two conditions: political support for proposed changes and the ability of those charged with carrying out the reform. An analysis of literature confirms that decentralization as a process is also a function of factors other than political will and capacity. These factors include trust (the extent of decentralization depends on the central government's trust in the local government, and vice versa), financial troubles, path dependencies, international developments, etc. An analysis of the distribution of decision making powers in areas of financing and human resources demonstrates that there is a trend towards decentralization, albeit inconsistent due to obstacles on the level of centralized management. The article maintains that there has to be an adequate balance between centralization, which is necessary for the implementation of general national educational objectives, and decentralization, which allows teachers, schoolchildren, parents and the representatives of local communities to participate in education management.

Keywords. *Education management, centralization, decentralization, education services market.*

Raktažodžiai: *švietimo sistemos valdymas, centralizacija, decentralizacija, švietimo paslaugų rinka.*

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Introduction

In the last decade of the twentieth century, starting in the Anglo-Saxon countries and later in other Western countries, a new attitude towards management began to develop, which integrated the best principles of business administration and economics into the system of public management. Modern concepts of public management also spurred changes in management of the education system. In the countries of continental Europe, however, and especially Central and Eastern Europe, where the normative tradition of public administration prevails, application of management ideas originating in Anglo-Saxon countries has not always been effective and entails a strong possibility of distortion. Problems of application are especially relevant to educational institutions. Since education is one of the most conservative social institutions, the relationship between education and the process of reform is even more complicated. Decentralization is one of the key strategies of reforming educational institutions based on a market model advocated by managerial ideas in public administration. Municipal authorities should have sufficient freedom to make decisions while schools should have a sufficient degree of autonomy to apply principles of business management. Thus, one of the core issues influencing education systems of various countries in the recent decades has been the ratio between centralization and decentralization. The main questions faced by reformers are the following: Which decision making powers have to be decentralized? Who should pay for education? Who should allocate the finances intended for education? Who should make decisions regarding staff?

It has to be stressed that, in both developed and developing countries, recent decades have shown a tendency towards decentralization which is defined as the transfer of power and responsibility over policies from the national level to the local level. However, there are recent indications that some governments are going back on this trend [3, 16, 17, 20, 7 and others]. Arguments outlined here underscore the need for further research into the practice of centralization/decentralization, especially in post-socialist states, which have a strong tradition of centralized management of the education system.

The purpose of this article is to present an analysis of the centralization/decentralization ratio in the management of the Lithuanian education system by using the findings of foreign studies on the issue of education decentralization. In order to achieve this objective, management ideas that have determined the decentralization processes in the Lithuanian education system will be discussed; the concept of decentralization and conditions for its success will be examined; several fields of education management will be analysed.

The management system of general education in Lithuania was chosen as the object of research. Theoretical assumptions were tested by interviewing experts in the field and analysing major legislation concerning the policy of general education in Lithuania (i.e. Law of Education, National education strategy for 2003-2012). Statistical data was provided by the Department of Statistics and the Ministry of Science and Education of Lithuania.

1. Prerequisites for the decentralization of education management

During the past decades, decentralization has come to be seen as a way to ensure the application of management principles and create conditions for the representation of the concerns of all stakeholders in education. However, these two aspects partially contradict each other. According to the model of the education services market, the production and consumption of education services must be separated in order to depoliticize administrative processes. This changes the participatory nature of communities and concerned groups with regard to management. As already mentioned, market mechanisms are most effective when consumers themselves obtain information about their options and thus practice their right to choose [21]. This promotes competition among service providers. Nevertheless, by choosing a particular product, consumers influence only the product's viability in the market and not the producer's decision on which product should be introduced into the market. Producers create demand for products and offer novelties, i.e., employ marketing, thus bypassing the community's active participation in decision making. On the other hand, practice shows that active involvement of interested parties in the process of planning and decision making increases the likelihood of a successful outcome.

In various countries, processes of education decentralization have been determined by different factors. Drawing on the experiences of different countries, T. Welsh and Noel F. McGinn [21] present several reasons for decentralization:

- to improve management;
- as a result of political democratization: society wants to be consulted with and take part in decision making regarding issues of direct concern;
- to help determine the limits of responsibility;
- to reduce the power of teachers' unions;
- because governments refuse to manage schools they can no longer finance.

Indeed, regions face different situations in areas of human and financial resources, and if the state does not find ways to alleviate such differences, the disparities may sharpen in the aftermath of decentralization. All these factors are more or less discernible in the management reforms of the Lithuanian education system.

It should be stressed, as R. Želvys [23] observes, that decentralization phenomena in this region may sometimes be coined as "decentralization of poverty", when the central governments of poor post-socialist countries try to shake off the responsibility of maintaining functional education institutions by transferring them to local municipalities.

Decentralization is carried out on the basis of the subsidiarity principle. Subsidiarity is a fundamental EU management principle according to which decisions are made as close as possible to their place of implementation, i.e., on the lowest competent management level. The functions of different management levels are redistributed based on this principle. The principle also facilitates the participation of local communities and citizens in decision making.

The implementation of a decentralization reform, as that of any other reform, requires the following two conditions: political support for the proposed changes and

the capability of those charged with executing the reform. The majority of decentralization reforms do not achieve their goals because they do not satisfy one or both of these conditions. Many reforms fail due to the fact that only a small circle of persons or interest groups enthusiastically support the changes. Some reforms are effectively halted by teachers who are not convinced that decentralization is beneficial. Other reforms fail because persons granted the right of decision making cannot exercise this right properly. According to T. Welsh and Noel F. McGinn [21], certain reforms can fail, e.g., when members of a participating community lack experience in both, collective decision making and organizational management.

2. Distribution of powers in Lithuanian general education system

There are four possible loci for the concentration of power in the Lithuanian education management system: the level of central government; the governing institutions of the regional level; the governing institutions of municipalities; the schools. According to the Law on Education, the governing bodies managing education in Lithuania are the following [11]: the Seimas (Lithuanian parliament), the government, Ministry of Education and Science, other ministries, state institutions, county governors; municipal institutions; school founders; principals. The law provides that part of education management powers may be transferred to self-governing institutions of education.

In accordance with the provisions of the *National Education Strategy 2003-2012*, functions, powers, obligations, responsibilities and accountabilities of the state, municipalities and schools are to be redistributed and clearly defined, and a procedure for cooperation between the schools be outlined; management is to be decentralized and de-concentrated according to the principle of subsidiarity.

A review of functions was carried out starting with the lowest—the school's—management level. The *Programme for improving school structure*, whose aim is to increase independence, openness and managerial democracy of schools, is related to this review. The review is intended to proceed on to administrative functions and powers of the higher levels of management after the implementation of this program. The principles of education content management are systematized in the *General education content formation, implementation, evaluation and renewal strategy for 2006–2012*. This strategy empowers the municipality to make decisions regarding the harmonization of education content prescribed at the state level with the needs of local communities, the school—regarding similar adjustment in view of the school-children's and school community's needs, and the experience of teachers, the teacher—regarding adjustments to the needs of the class and the individual student.

In order to describe the distribution of decision-making power in Lithuania, we will analyse the functions of the main governing bodies responsible for general education management: the ministry, the local authorities and the schools.

2.1. Powers of the Ministry of Education and Science

The *National Education Strategy of Lithuania* stipulates that the Ministry of Education and Science establishes the key requirements for general education, vocational education and training, and is responsible for ensuring the quality of education, accessibility to education, social justice in education, quality assessment and access to findings of such assessments to society. The *National Education Strategy* also empowers the Ministry of Education and Science, as the institution governing the national education system, to issue decisions (create strategies, plans, objectives, tasks, requirements) and carry out supervision (supervise, through authorized institutions, the achievement of goals and the implementation of programmes and legislation) [5].

However, an analysis of the *Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania* reveals that the powers of the Ministry remain much broader. These powers include the formulation and implementation of the state education policy, strategic planning, submission of proposals to the government, etc. All powers pertaining to the creation of education content, setting standards, administering examinations, textbook and teaching aid requirements, training and improvement of teacher qualification, accreditation of school activities and curricula remain in the purview of the Ministry. There are also new functions, such as the confirmation of the methodology and procedure for school audits. Thus, all in all, it may be contended that the *Law on Education* does not diminish the powers of the Ministry but, on the contrary, augments them to some extent. Thus, the delineation of the Ministry's tasks is only present in spirit as provided in the *National Education Strategy*. After reforming the system, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the Government and its subordinate institutions, must set the education agenda, while local governments and schools must find effective ways of implementing it. This structure complies with theoretical provisions for modernized public management, which call for a separation of policy making and implementation. On the other hand, it goes counter to one major intention of decentralization, which is to satisfy all interested parties. This is because policy is currently formulated by politicians whose experience in the educational sphere is frequently superficial, ideological and at times quite remote from the reality of the education process and its problems. In the formulation of education policy, the corporative model would be optimal if government representatives, education administrators and education services providers were all to participate in the deliberation and decision-making process on both the national and the local level.

2.2. Powers of municipal authorities

The powers of municipal authority are mostly concerned with ensuring a learning environment (the formation of a network of schools, the administering of examinations, school buses, etc.) and the establishment of assistance institutions (counselling services, professional development centres for teachers). Education policy and strategic planning (drafted according to the centrally prepared methodology) are emphasized on the level of municipal authorities. Among the goals of the National

Education Strategy is the expansion of municipal authority with regard to accessibility and quality of education within their territories. Municipal authorities and counties have been vested with a great share of responsibility not only for general education, but also for vocational education and training, special education, and adult education. Every municipal authority has become responsible for a register of children residing in their territories, and the coordination of the number and flow of students in the schools under their responsibility [9]. Generally, municipal authorities have acted as both mediator and coordinator between policy makers and service providers.

2.3. Powers of the principal

The list of the principal's powers according to the *Law on Education* is quite short and declarative in comparison with other education management subjects. The main functions of the principal are the following: planning of the school's activities, approval of the school's education programmes and supervision of their implementation; hiring and dismissal of teachers and other employees of the school according to established norms, analysis of the school's activity and state of management resources, initiation of the school's internal audit, etc.

2.4. Self-governing bodies in educational institutions

In education reforms over the last decade, it is not so much the implementation of business management methods that has received priority, but rather governance based on the participation of civic communities. Decentralization in particular can be seen as the essential condition not only for the development of the local self-governance but for the development of civil society in general [4]. This trend in reforms is influenced by a milder *New Public Management* variant which is frequently referred to as *New Public Service*, "co-participation of citizens in public management" and by other names. The self-governance of schools has a significant role in the process of decentralization as it strengthens society's influence on the system of education. The granting of self-governance powers to schools encourages the inclusion of new partners in the decision making process. Centralized decision making is forgone in favour of school communities, local governments, social partners, etc. gaining greater significance. The educational institution councils include not only representatives of parents and social partners but also representatives of supporters. The involvement of groups interested in the process and outcome of programmes increases their understanding of the objectives and constraints, heightens the legitimacy of reached decisions, and contributes to mobilizing support for policy implementation.

There are some countries where school communities are particularly influential. The greatest degree of community involvement in the management process may be observed in countries where the so-called political legitimacy (legal political mandate) model prevails in education system management [21]. According to this model, even the function of drawing up the budget is transferred to the community, a func-

tion closely related to decisions regarding the number of employees, their responsibilities and the power to employ and dismiss them.

Lithuania is also attempting some innovative solutions in terms of school self-governance, as established in *the program for improving the school structure for 2006–2009*. The character of self-governing institutions, their powers and principles of organization are to be legally established by the school's by-laws (statute). Organizations of teachers, schoolchildren, parents (or custodians, guardians) and other organizations can play a role within the framework of the school. The highest institution of the school's self-governance is the *school council* which represents schoolchildren, teachers, parents and the local community [18]. However, *the Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania* defines the functions of the school council quite abstractly—self-governance institutions of the school collectively discuss issues of school activity and funding and, within the scope of their power as defined in the by-laws (statute) of the school, adopt decisions and influence decisions of the principal; they also perform public supervision of the school's management. In reality, this happens only in exceptional cases. The highest self-governing institution of the school—the school council—does not have enough power to affect the decisions of the principal.

An analysis of the functions of Lithuanian education management subjects reveals that the implementation the National Education Strategy is effecting a slow but advancing decentralization and de-concentration of the education system on the basis of the subsidiarity principle.

3. Categories of Education Management Decisions

According to T. Welsh and N. F. McGinn, transferable decision-making powers can be divided into five categories: mission, operations, personnel, clients and finances [22: p.60]. Decisions are closely interrelated: one decision may affect the organization in more than one way. Hence, we will survey the distribution of decision-making powers in the fields of staff and finance management in Lithuanian institutions of general education.

3.1. Decisions regarding an education institution's personnel

3.1.1. Decisions regarding personnel qualifications and salaries

In Lithuania, the heads of education institutions select and hire teachers, taking into consideration established qualification requirements. It should be noted that centralization of decisions regarding the qualification of employees is problematic in some countries. Regional disparities make it impossible to have equally qualified teachers in some areas. For example, it is difficult to attract qualified teachers to work in small towns or rural areas.

In some countries, decentralization reform, which grants the right to define salary norms to local institutions, e.g. municipalities, serves as a mechanism for attracting qualified educators. It was thought that such measures would result in different salaries in different administrative units. However, teachers' unions have objected to this on the grounds that it violates professional solidarity. By controlling salaries locally, a teachers' labour market is created, which teachers' unions believe will result in salary decreases over time.

On the question of teachers' salaries, the issue of education quality should be mentioned. One of the conditions for ensuring quality is the encouragement of competition. The greatest obstacle to competition among teachers is the centrally defined salary scheme. At present, salary amounts depend on the programme of professional development, preparation for lessons, work in the classroom, the number of the hours of informal education and undertaking of other additional duties. Competition among teachers could be created by changing the salary calculation scheme and introducing the model applied in the business sector, whereby the salary would depend on achieved results and an agreement between the teacher and the principal or the school's community [5].

Usually teachers' unions are against models of payment according to results, because such models classify teachers according to their level and weaken organizational solidarity. Teachers are particularly anxious about decentralization proposals that would permit the local authorities to settle salaries according to results. It is argued that such payment models could promote corruption.

3.1.2. Requirements for the principals

In Lithuania, the school principal is appointed on the bases of a public tender held by the local government. Such a system is an optimal management decision, as the principal becomes accountable to the local government and is well aware of the situation in the local government. However, in Lithuania, the requirement for a candidate to the office of school principal is to have three years teaching experience. Such a requirement precludes professional managers (who have management experience but do not have pedagogical education) from becoming school principals [5].

A lack of management experience becomes particularly evident when management functions are decentralized. As noted above, one of the conditions for successful decentralization is management competence of persons making decisions locally. It must be emphasized that competence needed for such decentralization to be most effective cannot be equated to the ability to implement decisions made elsewhere. The persons making decisions locally must be able to identify problems, to know when to apply particular rules and when time has come to change them [21].

3.2. Aspects of centralization that impede the reform of education financing

Allocations from the state budget and municipal budgets make up the largest part of financing sources for education in Lithuania. EU structural funds and other resources are also utilized. There have only been marginal increases in private investments into education. Analysing the tendencies of education financing in Lithuania, a conclusion can be made that education financing is decentralized, because the portion of the state budget allocated for the national education budget has been declining, while municipalities have an ever increasing burden of financing general education. The National Education Strategy provides that support from municipalities to education should reach 75% of the education budget in 2012.

Starting in 2002, a reform of education financing was implemented based on the principle of *money follows the client*, locally coined as the *student's basket*. This reform creates conditions for competition among institutions providing educational services. The essence of the *student's basket* is education fund allocation per student. Its amount is established annually by the Government of the Republic of Lithuania upon the adoption of the *Law on the Approval of Financial Indicators of the State Budget and Municipal Budgets*.

Fund allocation based on *money follows the client* creates competition, which itself solves numerous management issues. However, the system of *student's basket* has not been fully implemented, as schools lack autonomy to allocate funds on their own accord. All money received by a school is earmarked for specific uses. Thus, schools are precluded from autonomy (financial, personnel management, etc.) [5]. The problem with the *student's basket* system is that it is bureaucratically detailed how schools must use the funds from these *baskets*: what portion should be allocated for salaries and what portion—for learning materials. Although it is stated in the report of the Ministry of Education and Science [8], that the *student's basket* methodology does not prohibit school communities from setting specific priorities for the school's activity and allocating larger portions of the *student's basket* than intended by the state for financing such priorities, in reality school communities have no opportunity to exercise this right.

Furthermore, we see that education administration departments in municipalities tend to reallocate the *student's basket*. When municipal schools cannot support themselves solely by the *student's baskets*, representatives of these departments find valid arguments to persuade the principals of schools with large numbers of students to “save” a portion of the *student's baskets* allocated for their school and cover the debts of schools that do not function quite as successfully.

Another aspect restricting competition among schools is centralized territorial division. *The Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania* stipulates that priority for enrolment in a state-run or municipal general education school is given to persons living in the territory assigned to be serviced by that school: “Priority of enrolment in a state-run or municipal general education school is granted to persons living in the service territory assigned to that school by its founder. At the request of parents (foster parents, guardians) and the child, a child may be enrolled in another general edu-

education school if vacancies are available” [11]. This principle of centralization may place certain restrictions on competition.

As we can see, a progressive *money follows the client* method for financing education institutions was chosen. However, traditions of centralized administration distort the idea and it partially loses its effectiveness.

Conclusions

1. Decentralization is a highly complex phenomenon. An education system may be decentralized in one area (e.g. the curriculum) while remaining centralized in another (e.g. financing). In some cases, regional or local authorities may become very powerful with regard to education, even if operating under the direction of a central government. In fact, all systems are a mixture of centralization and decentralization.

2. *The National Education Strategy* is effecting a slow but advancing decentralization and de-concentration on the basis of the subsidiarity principle. Lithuania’s education system remains to a large extent centralized. Major decisions are made at the level of the central government or with its approval. On the basis of the arguments presented above, it may be contended that the aforementioned powers and responsibilities do exist, but the decisions are not made sufficiently close to those who would benefit from education and decentralization.

3. An effective implementation of the decentralization reform requires the following two conditions: political support for proposed changes and the ability of those charged with carrying out the reform. The distribution of decision-making power in education management and observed decentralization tendencies in Lithuania confirm, that despite the nature of the implemented decentralization, success of the reform largely depends on the professional training of local officials in the field of management.

4. An analysis of the distribution of decision making powers in areas of financing and human resources demonstrates that there is a trend towards decentralization, albeit inconsistent due to obstacles on the level of centralized management.

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DECENTRALIZACIJOS ASPEKTAI REFORMUOJANT ŠVIETIMO SISTEMOS VALDYMĄ LIETUVOJE

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Santrauka

Lietuvoje pasigendama išsamesnių švietimo centralizacijos ir decentralizacijos santykio tyrimu, švietimo valdymo sričių centralizacijos ir decentralizacijos poreikio analizės. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjami veiksniai, lemiantys decentralizacijos procesus ir jų sėkmingą taikymą švietimo sistemos valdyme, analizuojamas centralizacijos ir decentralizacijos santykis Lietuvos bendrojo lavinimo švietimo valdyme. Remiantis atlikta literatūros analize bei išnagrinėjus sprendimų galios pasiskirstymą tarp bendrojo lavinimo švietimo valdymo subjektų Lietuvoje, prieinama prie išvados, kad švietimo valdymo sistema Lietuvoje laipsniškai decentralizuojama ir dekoncentruojama vadovaujantis subsidiarumo principu. Švietimo valdymo reformų analizė išryškina tendencijas centralizuotą valdymą taikyti įgyvendinant bendruosius nacionalinius švietimo tikslus, tuo tarpu decentralizacija pasitelkiama siekiant sudaryti sąlygas įgyvendinti vadybos idėjas bei mokyklos bendruomenės atstovų dalyvavimui švietimo valdyme.