Empowerment - a chance for the development of a school organization

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Abstract

The article presents the results of quantitative and qualitative research carried out in 2013 by the Centre for Education Development in Warsaw in a group of over 2800 school and educational institutions head teachers in Poland. The main objective of this article is the presentation of the empowerment process in schools in view of management sciences. The issues concerning empowerment discussed in this article lead to a conclusion that school head teachers' activities within the scope of the examined competence are consistent with its understanding in the field of management sciences.

Keywords: school head teacher, learning, empowerment

Introduction

Currently, educational systems in many countries all over the world undergo numerous changes which are, on the one hand, the result of rapid changes in the communities and, on the other hand, of public opinion's considerable interest in the effects of their activity. Due to rapid changes in the communities, it is becoming difficult to search for the criteria of effectiveness of the schools' activities. In the educational systems oriented towards the pupils' final results, there is a tendency to compete for the pupils, and the countries which have to face problems of multiculturalism in schools undertake many activities aiming at the integration of various communities. Applying specific criteria of good schools to particular institutions cannot replace

their activities related to the determination of their objectives. Applying some average statistical values to schools can actually lead to a situation in which these values will diverge from the objectives of a particular organization. Deciding what characterizes a good school is incorrect if the school's autonomy is limited to making decisions concerning its mission, vision and objectives (Dalin, Rollf, Buchen, 1998). The school autonomy models discussed in literature on educational management are based on an assumption that it is the state that determines a set of skills expected from pupils, often referred to as educational standards, which have to be met by schools. Educational standards are the effect of a compromise between the schools' possibilities and the society's expectations towards them. Hence, in all educational discussions the problem of the schools' accountability to the state and its citizens becomes a key issue. Accountability is strictly connected with transparency as well. This category means that it is legitimized by openness. Since schools operate in the interest of all citizens, then the transparency of their activities should be self-evident. Considering another perspective of transparency, one cannot forget about making decisions in accordance with the effective law, so that there is no uncertainty with respect to their compliance with the social objectives. The acceptance of a specific set of tasks and objectives by every school, being a condition of its autonomy, brings about further implications, including those related to the acceptance of a specific leadership vision by the school.

Freedom and autonomy

The acceptance of a specific leadership vision by a school entails a discussion on the relations between the previously mentioned school autonomy and freedom. Polish schools have autonomy in many areas of their activity, which is proved by international studies on various educational systems (Eurydice, 2008; 2009). The studies lead us to a conclusion that in those countries in which schools have greater autonomy with respect to what and how to teach and how to evaluate pupils, pupils achieve better results. Full school autonomy means making decisions in accordance with the law or general regulations concerning education, without the participation of any external institutions (even if the school has to contact a higher authority). In the area of teaching, Polish schools may, inter alia, decide freely about the choice of teaching methods, the internal regulations concerning pupil evaluation, and to develop their own teaching curricula based on the effective core curriculum. Head teachers have full autonomy with respect to the employment and dismissal of both the teaching and non-teaching staff. Decisions concerning the school budget made by schools need to be approved by the local government authorities; some local governments give school head teachers autonomy in administering the funds obtained as a re-

sult of leasing classes and other school rooms. In the above mentioned report, these decisions have been referred to as limited autonomy. Freedom in these areas means making decisions which serve the implementation of the central process in schools, i.e. learning and teaching.

In his studies on educational leadership in Polish schools, Mazurkiewicz writes about limitation of freedom, and consequently, about depriving schools of their autonomy. He claims that educational leaders are initiators and visionaries only in theory, whereas in practice they are controllers of teachers and organizers of the school infrastructure improvement, who are merely responsible for safety, but not for the pupils' intellectual development (Mazurkiewicz, 2012). The dissonance between autonomy and freedom will be smaller if the following principles are taken into consideration:

- the head teacher alone is fully responsible for the effective functioning of the organization and the continuous development and improvement of the quality of school work,

- accountability is the head teacher's obligation; he/she is responsible for the level of task accomplishment in the organization and suffers the consequences of any failures and inappropriate development,

- the person who is accountable has to be equipped with decision-making competencies, as one can only be accountable for things which one can make decisions about,

- in successful management, the accountable persons should be transparent in their actions and able to empower other organization members and involve them in the decision-making process.

The last principle seems to be one of the dominant principles of an educational leader. In educational leadership, a set of specific key competencies necessary for the accomplishment of every school's objectives is a condition for the effective learning and teaching process organization. These competencies comprise, inter alia, strategic thinking and coping in critical situations. Empowerment is another significant competence.

The scope of head teachers' empowerment

The empowerment process has been described in many works in the field of management sciences. Empowerment means giving certain decision-making powers along with responsibility for these decisions to lower managerial personnel; its essence should usually be sought for in specialization (Niemczyk, 2000). This definition is to some extent paradoxical, since a head teacher is responsible for the school's functioning as long as he/she is a head teacher and he/she cannot be exempt from this responsibility. Another problem with empowerment is the fact that a head teacher empowering others actually maintains what he/she would like to give (responsibility), and gives what he/she would like

to maintain, i.e. some of his/her powers.

The research carried out in 2013 by the Centre for Education Development in Warsaw in a group of 2824 school and educational institutions head teachers implies another definition in which emphasis is put on sharing responsibilities that head teachers do not necessarily have to perform in person. It seems that in the case of school head teachers it means a specification of the method of sharing responsibility or delegation of a part of one's workload (Leana, 1986), which can be proved by the respondents' statements:

- "Empowerment (author's note) is delegating one's powers to other people, making them responsible for certain tasks and freedom of action;"

- "I understand this competence as delegating matters to other people. Delegating matters to deputy head teachers and other teachers."

An important aspect of empowerment is the specification of the scope of tasks which can be delegated to other employees. Typologies of head teacher functions defining so-called organic functions in which head teachers' tasks assigned only to this position are described may be a key to the specification of the scope of delegated tasks, but each time the tasks have to be adjusted to the specific conditions of schools' functioning, the pupils', their parents' and the employees' needs. P. F. Drucker presented an inter-

esting typology of managerial functions. He divided the job of the manager into several basic tasks (Drucker, 1994):

- setting objectives,

- organizing work and structures and selecting people to accomplish the tasks that need to be done,

- motivating and communicating,

- measuring (establishing appropriate targets and yardsticks, and analysing performance),

- developing people.

The acceptance of this typology does not mean that a head teacher is to implement these tasks on his/her own. It is rather an indication of tasks which can become a yardstick of a head teacher's organizational effectiveness. Organizing teachers' work in a network structure will have a larger impact on the organizational effectiveness than determining the time of a school assembly by a head teacher. It seems that the type of tasks delegated to other employees can be one of the criteria of selecting tasks to be delegated by a head teacher. The freedom of action mentioned earlier by one of the respondents may be limited exclusively to determining the time of meetings with parents, but it may also be a possibility to administer funds for the purchase of teaching aids. A head teacher making a decision concerning empowerment should be able to determine the importance of matters to be dealt with by him/herself; should an educational leader spend more time on matters related to the vision of the school development or will it be better if he/she

is more preoccupied with the colour of the maths lab walls? Making decisions concerning empowerment it is also important to determine the significance of the matters controlled by a head teacher in person. This is where a dilemma concerning the necessity of checking the cleanness of blackboards in classes may appear, whereas the level of the teachers' knowledge of modern learning techniques takes much more time. Making a decision concerning delegating a task to other employees also requires concentration on strategic matters important in the perspective of learning and teaching related processes. The following examples present the practical application of the above mentioned principles and illustrate the respondents' statements proving that head teachers delegate their employees to particular tasks or use their support in establishing task teams:

- *"For instance, empowering a teacher to organize an event at school. One has to know who to empower, how it should be done, and how to organize it well."*

- *"Sharing responsibilities at a higher level - I deal with more strategic management, whereas the deputy head teacher and the school educationalist - with current issues. The educationalist is responsible for upbringing, the deputy head teacher - for didactic matters, as I would not be able to deal with it,"*

- *"Establishing task teams in schools*

which take on some of the head teacher's responsibility."

- *"For instance, establishing teacher teams and showing them the way: that they have to mind the deadlines, prepare curricula, get familiar with the core curriculum and the regulations."*

Empowerment in quantitative research

The above mentioned research showed that 96.4% of the respondents considered the competence of empowerment to be significant and as many as 64.6% of those - very significant. A detailed study of correlations between the demographic variables also proved that a head teacher's age and tenure are not statistically significant. Statistically significant differences were observed with respect to the institution's location and the respondents' sex. Women tended to evaluate the competence higher than men.

As many as 84.2% of the respondents claimed to possess this competence, of which 43.5% claimed not to have any problems with making use of it. 7.5% of the respondents claimed that they did not have the competence to empower others. Statistically significant differences were observed in the respondents' statements with respect to the institution's location - the smaller the place, the lower the percentage value was (86.4% of the respondents from large towns claimed to have the competence, and respectively, 80.2% of the respondents from smaller towns). The

older the respondents, the more of them claim to have the competence of empowerment – in the group of respondents aged 60 and more 90.7% of head teachers claim to have it, while in the group of respondents aged up to 36 it is only 75.6% of head teachers who claim to have it. The respondents' seniority also influences their possession of the competence; the largest percentage of the respondents who claim to have the competence – 88.1% – is in the group of persons with 11-15 years of tenure. The shorter the tenure, the lower the level of possessing the competence; 78.1% of those below 5 years of tenure claim to have the competence. The only exception, just like in the case of age, is the oldest group of respondents with the longest tenure (more than 15 years); 87.6% of the respondents in this group declared the possession of the competence.

The advantages and barriers of empowerment in the development of a school

It should be noted that interviews conducted within the research with a group of 170 school and educational institutions head teachers proved that apart from risk management empowerment is the most frequently indicated weakness of head teachers (28 out of the total of 35 head teachers described this competence as their weakness). The main advantages perceived by the respondents in empowerment are connected with relieving them from excessive duties and a positive influence on the quali-

ty of work and their mental comfort:

- *"The final responsibility is always the head teacher's responsibility, but empowerment allows me to take a breather;"*

- *"Had it not been for empowerment, a head teacher would not be able to manage the school on his own. It is necessary to share responsibilities with other co-workers."*

Head teachers emphasize their considerable responsibility for the functioning of the organization, but they can also see an opportunity to be released from dealing with current matters and operational activities which are of lesser importance for the organization's success. In accordance with literature on the subject, a manager (head teacher) should focus on key issues and be active in those areas of the school's operation which have a decisive impact on its success or failure (Koźmiński, Piotrowski, 2004). Such key issues comprise, for instance (Otręba, 2012):
- specifying the school's developmental objectives and strategies,
- developing and improving the school's structure,
- planning objectives and funds required for their achievement,
- planning and implementing organizational changes in schools,
- planning educational changes (as a reaction to external examination results),
- initiating activities aiming at team integration and improvement of its work,

- undertaking activities aiming at team problem solving.

The positive aspect of empowerment is not only connected with the head teacher; the respondents can also discern the impact of the process on the functioning of the entire school - and thus empowerment contributes to the proper organization of work, increase of its quality and the accomplishment of the organization's objectives. The following statements can prove the above mentioned advantages:

- *"The fewer tasks I delegate, the less time I have to manage [the school]"*

- *"It is important, because it improves and increases work quality."*

Empowerment is also seen as a process motivating employees to work and it may increase their effectiveness, which consequently increases their potential. This also increases the teachers' identification with the school's objectives by developing and enhancing their sense of responsibility. This type of thinking is close to the abovementioned concept of educational leadership, the key element of which is the participation of every member of an organization in leadership; by means of various interactions they all contribute to the organization's development (Dorczak, 2013). The following statements illustrate these aspects of empowerment:

- *"It is important, because empowering others one makes them feel responsible for the organization and the school;"*

- *"It is a form of team mobilization, since when people are personally involved in something and have a sense of influencing something, they become even more involved."*

Empowerment can also be treated as a method of training and motivating employees, or a method of employee competence development. Adopting such a method of motivating employees is advantageous for an organization, since it does not necessitate involving external resources, it allows for continuous training without infringing the existing organizational bonds. In this sense, empowerment can be a significant element of the organization's learning process. In order to make empowerment an effective training tool several conditions have to be fulfilled (Supernat, 2003):

- teachers should be aware of their individual roles in the entire school organization and the training has to be oriented towards the achievement of a specific objective of which both the head teacher and the teachers are well aware of,

- in order to achieve the expected effects of empowerment the relation between the head teacher and the other teachers has to be based on trust; since a possibility of making decisions is delegated, teachers should be given full power, with an assumption that teachers will make use of their knowledge and skills in order to achieve the best results,

- school head teachers should be aware

that good results are not achieved immediately; this means that teachers may tackle a task several times, and head teachers may, if required, play the role of consultants – it is important to observe the employees who should be able to admit having made a mistake and to openly talk about their needs related to the task implementation,

- when a task is accomplished, the level of its accomplishment should be assessed; teachers should have such a possibility.

The abovementioned conditions have been confirmed in the head teachers' statements as well:

- *"Trust and reliability are important in empowerment;"*

- *"It means that a head teacher does not have to do everything by himself/herself, that he/she can easily empower other teachers, employees, in particular when he/she feels that an employee is well prepared for work."*

According to head teachers, making a decision concerning empowering other employees it is important to trust the team members and to be convinced that they are ready to take up these tasks. Fulfilling these conditions may also be considered to be the execution of a head teacher's functions related to his/her supervisory rights. They offer an opportunity to assess the employees' competencies and their level of involvement in the task accomplishment. It is also an opportunity to assess the teachers' readiness and potential to learn. The acceptance of these conditions

gives employees a sense of decision-making responsibility and simultaneously allows them to develop their independence.

The barriers in the practical application of the competence of empowerment most often result from the head teachers' inability to empower teachers – lack of trust is frequently indicated as a source of this inability:

- *"I have difficulties with empowerment and with trust to people performing their tasks."*

- *"This is my weakness, (...) first of all, nobody can do it as good as I can, secondly, it seems that everybody is always busy, and then there comes frustration and fatigue."*

- *"I think that if I have to explain my vision to someone, how to do it, I do not know whether this person will understand what I mean."*

It should also be emphasised that a head teacher's sense of responsibility for all activities in the school organization is of considerable importance in his/her making a decision concerning the independent implementation of a particular task. Head teachers do not delegate certain tasks because they are afraid that a teacher may perform them slower, or he/she is not interested in performing the task at all, or he/she already has too many tasks assigned (Otręba, 2012). Consequently, head teachers perform all duties on their own. This approach gives

the head teachers a sense of control over the quality of the task implementation:

- *"It ensues from the fact that I do not have good managerial staff. Now I have already trained them, and there will be personnel changes. They are not utterly bad people, but I am not fully satisfied with their work. I have taken over the majority of duties."*

Some of the head teachers would need legal regulations in order to make decisions concerning empowerment:

- *"The greatest problem is that despite the fact that head teachers can empower others, there is nothing about it in the law, and it is the head teacher who is responsible for everything, so what if I empower someone, and then I have to go to prison, for instance, because something has not been done, even though I have not been present, as I also have the right to take a holiday leave."*

The difficulty in delegating tasks results not only from the head teachers' attitudes, but as it has already been mentioned, also from co-workers' attitudes, if they are unwilling to accept the head teacher's tasks. The following examples illustrate this problem:

- *"My teachers do know that I am very busy, and yet they come to me with every problem;"*

- *"A teacher can say that he/she works for a certain remuneration, and if a head teacher asks him/her to take over one of his/*

her functions, he/she may refuse to do it."

Conclusion

The relations between freedom and autonomy discussed in the first part of the article may be significantly developed by head teachers. A lot depends on their personality traits which turned out to be an important variable in making decisions concerning empowerment. Limitation of freedom, and consequently, of the autonomy of the entire organization, is also the result of the head teacher's organizational skills. The attitudes, standards and values of all employees are also important in defining the role of the process in the organizational development of schools. Consequently, empowerment becomes one of the key competencies of the entire school organization. The condition of learning is an organization's readiness to adapt to the changing surroundings as well as effective communicating inside the organization. Empowerment opens a space for developing relations based on mutual trust. Mutual learning also means respecting the right to make mistakes. A head teacher's reaction to the employees' mistakes cannot be withdrawal from empowerment. It is better if empowerment becomes an instrument of motivating employees than only a result of the head teacher's thinking of his/her full responsibility for all the activities of the school organization.

The research results have showed mental models related to the comprehension of empowerment similar to those

presented in the theory of management sciences. These results have proved that there is a considerable need of improving the managerial skills in this respect; the emphasis put on the significance of the competence is also a proof that empowerment is perceived as one of the most important competencies of head teachers.

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