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The impact of decentralization on the Romanian school

Stăiculescu Camelia[a]*, Enăchescu Vladimir-Aurelian[a], Dobrea Răzvan Cătălin[b]

[a]Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Teacher Training Department, Bucharest 010371, Romania
[b]Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Department of Management, Bucharest 010371, Romania

Abstract

This paper addresses the impact of decentralization on Romanian school - a theme of great interest for the Romanian society. Living in a time of accelerated change and transformation, seeking for answers to the problems of contemporary society - school as a social institution is in the midst of these changes. Today's educational policies show that the direction chosen is that of decentralization. But is this real? Which are the views of those directly involved in this process of change? This paper analyzes the theoretical foundations of decentralization of social policy and makes a qualitative analysis of the views expressed by local councillors, representatives of management structures in education (school inspectors, principals) and teachers of the decentralization. The paper also suggests a number of recommendations for optimizing the decentralization of the education system.

Key words: decentralization, education system, educational policy

1. Decentralisation - option of educational policy

The society is constantly hanging in an attempt to find different solutions for contemporary problems. Having gone through a transitional phase after 1990, post-communist Romania has undergone many changes in the political, economic, cultural, and social areas. All these changes had a direct impact on the education system, making it difficult to take over and change so as to meet the new demands. We appreciate that even though more than 20 years have passed, solutions have been found. The school system is in a constant transformation process - undergoing

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40-766-364-814.
 E-mail address: camistaiculescu@yahoo.com

changes that are often inconsistent and introduced without prior preparation. Many of these changes are made for the sake o decentralization and invoked as a panacea that can solve problems. What is decentralization? Can it address these problems? How? These are the questions this paper will try to answer.

The decentralization of the education system is not an end in itself, but rather a policy option adopted in terms of democratization, learning domestic life and efficient administration of public services. Analyses of legal provisions and measures adopted in the reform process indicate that formal decentralization is the solution chosen by Romania. Recent experience has shown that decisions made at the central level can in no way take into account all the circumstances and all concrete needs and interests of the various institutions and individuals involved. A democratic decision-making process requires the participation of a country's citizens, which directly or indirectly affects them (Herczyński, J. 2005).

Decentralisation is a policy aimed at sectoral and other components of the social (political, economic, cultural, administrative) and causes changes in all these areas.

Neither of the two types of political choices (centralization / decentralization) is a valid value itself. Centralization and decentralization can streamline the management activity based on general social conceptions of the philosophical, political, cultural and economic fields. Decentralization has no value on its own, and is not a condition of democracy. Rather, it is a type of driving, deliberate process, therefore, avoiding importation of foreign models, and preventing the uptake of decentralization as a "fashionable" (E. Peacock, 1999).

Modern theories of management education call for the adoption of decentralization and participatory strategies. Many countries facing educational impasse appeal to these strategies. Reform projects suggested the implementation of decentralization through varied and tinted models based on specific educational and social situations. The solutions adopted for the Romanian educational system fall on a continuum, ranging from centralism to moderate decentralization. These projects have been initiated in the last two decades by many countries, having as a common object the location axis of educational systems: efficiency - effectiveness - quality. They are also socially relevant by connecting the school to the community – denoting a real and effective involvement of the beneficiaries of the educational effort in support of the education system.

In the current social-economic climate - given the dynamic and complex educational environment - the improvement of organizational competitiveness through collaboration is a prerequisite for schools to become visible in the global space. (M, Năstase, 2012).

Essentially, the decentralization of education is the transfer of authority, responsibility and resources from central to local level, as well as the transfer of decision-making and general and financial management of the schools and the local community.

Decentralization in education involves:
• redistribution of responsibilities, decision-making authority and accountability for specific educational functions from the central to the local level;
• participation of the non-administrative, civil society representatives in the decision-making process (parents, NGOs, businesses, professional associations, social partners and so on).
• transfer of decision-making authority from central to local levels and / or organizational decision to close the public education service beneficiaries.

Decentralization gives the school the primary role of decision maker, providing consultation and participation of all social actors interested in sustainable development of the community in which it operates on the one hand, and on the other hand, in terms of globalization of education (Stăiculescu, C., 2012).

2. Decentralization "Basic" - views of those directly involved in the process of decentralization of the education system

Any organizational change and system requires the active involvement of human resources. Therefore, we believe that change should begin with an analysis of the opinion of those directly affected by. Decentralization of education involves human resources located at different levels of the system, as well as community representatives directly interested in what happens in schools.

The research results presented below were obtained from a qualitative analysis of the views of community representatives (local councillors), managerial structures in education (school inspectors and principals of schools) and teachers (members of the Board of Directors of schools) expressed in the context of training sessions conducted throughout the country. These were organized within the project POSDRU/1/1.1/S/8, *Training counsellors and*

support for the implementation of the decentralization strategy of pre-university education, funded under the European Social Fund, Human Resources Development Operational Programme, Key Area of Intervention 1.1 Access to Education initial training and quality, developed by the Ministry of National Education in partnership with the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Department of Teacher Training in October 2009 - March 2011.

On-the-job training was attended by 394 local councillors (23,45% respondents), 1007 teachers (59,94% respondents), members of the Board of Directors of schools, and 279 school inspectors and principals of pre-school units (16,6% respondents). The distribution per unit area involved courses unfolding in five training centres (Bucharest, Constanta, Cluj, Iasi, Timisoara), which included all subordinated counties. Beneficiaries of the training were representatives of many local communities, both in rural and urban areas.

The opinions were expressed in the context of individual and group applications developed through the subjects covered in the training program (school and community organizations, school management).

The results of the training can be judged as a general process of informing and consulting human resources directly involved in decentralization: teachers and community representatives (members of Local Councils). This may form a true philosophy of decentralization, focusing not on central and local levels, but on the lowest levels - those who are directly involved in school life and local communities.

The principles of decentralization (in order of frequency of responses), as indicated by those involved in the consultation process, are described in the literature and in educational policy documents: subsidiarity (decision closest to their effect) (57% of respondents), responsibility (46% of respondents), autonomy (41% of respondents), resource management at the local level (37% of respondents), local curriculum adapted to local needs (CDL) (27% of respondents), participation, partnership, equity, and promotion of local culture.

Trainees argued that decentralization should be based on values that promote partnership and collaboration. Values that may underlie decentralization indicated by trainees inscribe in a wide range: quality, cooperation, competition, communication, honesty / integrity, faith, culture, knowledge, education, efficiency, commitment, initiative, confidence, multiculturalism, professionalism, promotion of interaction between social actors, institutions as recognized landmarks of the community (school, family, church, city hall), interpersonal and interethnic relations, compliance, mutual respect, responsibility, satisfaction of common interests / common aspirations ("common good"), reliability, security, solidarity, spirituality, tolerance.

The most common value mentioned relates to the preservation and promotion of local traditions and cultural background (tradition, authenticity, local specificity, preservation of identity, sense of belonging to cultivate historical and geographical space and community, respect for traditions and customs).

Decentralization is seen as a solution to the assertion of local identity, promotion and recognition of the elements that differentiate communities and states.

Examples of good practice locally developed described by participants, primarily aimed at organizing and conducting cultural activities:
- Cultural events that promote local culture: village dances, folk music, festivals, celebrations, competitions to promote customs and traditions (11 responses);
- Rehabilitation of symbolic buildings, promotion of cultural sites (castles, monasteries, museums) (8 responses);
- Provision of facilities for businesses providing traditional activities (support for traditional activities) (7 responses);
- Organization of tours (5 responses) ;
- Promotion of the local image by creating partnerships to support various traditions (in other regions of the country and abroad) (4 responses);

Other responses:
- Development of materials (TV spots, leaflets, websites) to promote local image;
- Exchange of experience with local councils / regions;
- Support of those entities that contribute to the preservation of the local identity (NGOs, craftsmen, community resource persons, etc.);
- Identify and reward individuals who represent the community ("honorary citizens");
- Joint activities of different ethnic and religious groups.

The rules and regulations that must be at the basis of a good local collaboration and effective decentralization are:

- Common standards for everyone involved / compliance with a local code of conduct / rules that support local character (9 responses);
- Acceptance of diversity of behaviours, traditions (8 responses);
- Empowerment o all community members (8 responses);
- Involvement in community decision-making (7 responses);
- Identification of specific means of local conservation and promotion (7 responses);
- Aid for the disadvantaged (5 responses);

General advantages of decentralization also vary within a wide range:

- Improvement of the quality of education (6 responses);
- Involvement of parents in educational decisions (6 responses);
- Adaptation of the school to the labour market (reducing local unemployment, the labour market dynamics) (4 responses);

Other responses:

- Increased control over resource management;
- Increased efficiency of financial resources;
- Prolonged time to develop local strategies;
- Transparency;
- Effective control;
- Volunteers;
- Performance pay;
- Autonomy;
- Strengthening of relationships between local institutions;
- Accountability by those involved;
- Distribution of resources according to priorities;
- Involvement of local authorities in problem-solving;
- Promotion of projects with local co-financing;
- Local participation in cultural, scientific and sport activities;
- Development of material resources.

Local advantages of decentralization:

- Efficient allocation of funds (10 responses);
- Obtaining funding received from programs and projects (easier access to financing) (9 responses);
- Institutional autonomy (9 responses);
- Local management of human and financial resources (6 responses);
- Separation of school managers from the political field (4 responses);

Other responses:

- Establishing the teacher training community and the school plan;
- Recognition of the teaching profession and stimulation of innovation;
- Improvement of local government.

A series of risks of decentralization were also reported. They are particularly relevant as they were noted by those directly involved in the process, but can be prevented by taking various measures.

The risks of decentralization are:

- Political involvement (must be defined) (12 responses);
- Contradictions in the decision-making process (10 responses);
- Increasing subjectivity in the assessment (7 responses);

- Bureaucracy (6 responses);
- Abandonment of fields (e.g. social protection of poor families) (4 responses);
- Ignorance with regard to school problems (3 responses);

Other responses:
- Risk of conflict brought about by the performance reward grant;
- Gaps in local funding;
- The phenomenon of corruption (e.g. people "favoured" during the tenure tests);
- Inadequacy of the financial system towards the process of decentralization;
- Mismatch between local and national policies;
- Lack of communication and transparency;
- Lack of coherent legislation;
- Diminishment of the degree of collaboration between institutions;
- The existence of disadvantaged localities with few inhabitants;
- Lack of local jobs;
- The low level of culture;
- The school may be subject to debates regarding educational policies;
- Lack of transparency in decision-making;
- Very strong influence on the school community;
- Advancement of the idea of superiority and subordination to the school council;
- Preferential risk management resources;
- Abandonment of research areas / qualification of teachers, etc.

There are *several types of barriers / blockages* that stand in the way of decentralization and change, as indicated by the respondents:
- Barriers related to the personality and behaviour of those involved: fatigue, conflicts, incompetence, limited freedom, routine, autocratic management style, subjectivity, resistance to change, egocentric mentalities, conservatism, lack of knowledge / ignorance about the decentralization process / lack of theoretical and practical training, "thirst for power," fear of failure, shallowness, divergent interests, avoidance of responsibility, lack of involvement of decision-makers; mentality, lack of motivation / lack of motivation of those involved (teachers, parents, authorities), lack of experience; tendency to contact higher authorities/ "the centre" with regard to any issue;
- Barriers related to the management and implementation of decentralization: high costs, disorganization, lack of human resources, conflicting decisions, lack of communication, bureaucracy (excessive), minimal family involvement in school life, conflicts of interest between local institutions / people;
- Institutional barriers: the inability of public institutions to manage the problems, devolution, incomplete / ambiguous legislative framework, lack / shortage of financial and human resources.

As can be seen from the above listed items, most impediments identified are those related to the personality and behaviour of those involved in the decentralization process.

The proposed *solutions* to identified obstacles and their potential escalation can be classified into several categories:
- Solutions related to human resources involved in decentralization: the frame for the mutual communication; training / informing local councillors and those involved in the phenomenon of decentralization, empowering managers to accept decentralization, being constantly aware of the idea of decentralization, improvement of human resources information, presenting the advantages of decentralization to those involved in local teams, providing financial incentives to members of these teams, providing program information / training for young people in order to encourage their involvement, harmonization of interests, awareness of common interests;
- Legislative solutions: lobbying and advocacy for the adoption of appropriate legal provisions, implementation of the provisions of decentralization and control system during the implementation, development of modern legislation in accordance with European standards, promotion of coherent legislation, adoption of clear deadlines for the implementation process (strategy for the parliament and each local council);

- Solutions related to resources management: encouragement of local initiative, proper delegation of responsibilities, attraction of local resources from various sources (local taxes, budget allocations, programs and projects, sponsorships, etc.) precise tasks, involvement of all stakeholders, achieving programmes / projects in partnership, implementation of pilot projects, establishment of an algorithm - the steps, hierarchy, subordination relations, implementation modalities, negotiation / conflict resolution strategies, creating regulations;
- Solutions related to information management: communication and transparency, debate, conducting information campaigns, media involvement, seminars etc., case studies, training and information projects; transparency.
- It follows from the analysis of these suggestions, that decentralization can occur only through proper management of all resources involved, as well as collaboration, which should be based on respect for rules, standards, and norms recognized by all the stakeholders. Decisions should be taken in a public debate.

The training also addressed the issue of which form of decentralization is best: decentralization or decentralization of schools by the authorities.

'Decentralization to schools' means autonomy - the transfer of authority to schools themselves. A strong and capable principal who runs the school will have responsibility for the daily educational process, but will also be in charge of the school's administration. The school, in close cooperation with the social environment represented by the pupils, will know best about the specific needs and interests of students, and will find ways to ensure their best possible educational development.

This form of decentralization involves:
- The adoption of legislation that allows more freedom for the principal;
- The possibility for schools to provide a rich educational offer fitted to the needs of its beneficiaries;
- Local responsibility for employing the staff;
- A clearly defined budget allocation;
- Training of school principals, also fully employed as managers.

Benefits and risks of school decentralizations as perceived by trainees:
Benefits:
- Deciding on consistent measures regarding the organizational training (7 responses);
- Correct identification of school problems (5 responses);
- Management of financial resources for their own decisions (4 responses);
- Equal access to resources (4 responses);
- Adapting education to the needs of the community (e.g. Determining occupational profiles) (3 responses);

Other responses:
- Proper allocation of financial and material resources;
- Development of the curriculum according to the needs of the school (the school curriculum, curriculum LT);
- Increased quality of education as a result of freedom of choice;
- Direct access to, and management of, various material resources;
- Employment of counsellors / psychologists;
- Better relationship between the school and families (many proposals from families);
- Proper management of human resources;
- Participation charge (teachers, parents, students, authorities);
- Division of responsibilities;
- Increased role of the Board;
- Increased motivation;
- Lack of pressure from higher-level staff;

Risks:
- Subjectivity in decision making (11 responses);

- Lack of financial resources (7 responses);
- The subjectivity of managers (3 responses);
- Conservatism (2 responses);
- The relationship between teachers and manager can be altered;
- Teachers may have fear of losing tenure;
- Inaccuracies may occur on the part of school principals;
- Lack of communication;
- Dictatorial attitude;
- Lack of funds;
- Small schools disadvantaged by funding per capita;
- Managers weak / insufficient training;
- Managers can be authoritarian.

The meaning of the concept of decentralization 'by local authorities' - "focuses on the transfer of power to local authorities."
This form requires that:
- Schools themselves be considered part of the local school network – a process that must be planned and conducted (4 responses);
- Changing demographic processes implies that the local networks need to change by strengthening or creating new institutions (3 responses);
- The local agent is the best person appointed to manage the long-term activity (e.g. closure of schools) (2 responses);
- In financial terms, local authorities should require high-spending schools to adjust their budgets in order to achieve efficient use of resources;
- The local authority would have a significant influence on the selection of school principals;
- Benefits and risks of decentralization by authorities perceived by the trainees:
- advantages:
- A unified vision for all schools comprising a locality;
- Distribution of resources based on performance and needs;

Risks:
- Dictatorship of the mayor;
- Lack of awareness about internal problems of the school;
- Subjective involvement of the local council and mayor's office in solving specific problems of education;
- Lack of financial resources (sharing their poverty);
- Lack of training of the authorities and their lack of ability to manage the stringent issues of the school.

Of course, the two forms are not incompatible but complementary. There are responsibilities that have already been taken over, and others that will be taken over by schools and by local authorities.

The analysis of all data leads to several conclusions:
- Decentralization is a process created for the people, and can be a means of increasing the quality of education by adapting it to real local needs;
- Better information and training is required for all those involved in order to understand the provisions of decentralization and the responsibilities that ensue;
- Those involved have their own views on decentralization, their own expectations and fears about the changes it entails. It is necessary to take into account all these views during the implementation of decentralization strategies;
- Decentralization leads to changes in all social micro-systems that influence education.
- Decentralization should be gradual and use thoughtful and correlated strategies.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

Clear, balanced and well-defined distribution of the decision-making power between organizations and institutions representing local and regional communities on the one hand, and the national level - (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Interior) on the other hand, will help avoid imbalances and distortions in the organization, management and support of the national education system. The success of decentralization is based mainly on the balance between authority and responsibility on the one hand, and human resource capacity and information flows on the other.

In the managerial area, decentralized decision refers to the development of monitoring, control and evaluation strategies, both by the local community, as well as by specialized institutions and government bodies. The establishment of an optimal decentralization process that matches a particular national context means adopting an attitude balanced with some essential elements, such as the tradition-innovation ratio, past-future, stability-change, global vs. national.

The choice of a management system in charge of educational policy should be based on a system of accepted social values and cultural traditions, and should take into account the existing management model. It requires synergy between basic management concepts and the culture of the society where it will be applied. If certain cultural assumptions of management models are ignored, they can become an obstacle to any kind of transformation. Change management can thus be imposed only through theoretical models and developed strategies; however, cultural patterns and attitudes should also be considered.

From this perspective, the Romanian education system illustrates the relationship between centralization and decentralization.

For many years Romanian schools practiced a centralized management model, deeply rooted in the national culture and mentality, and it cannot be changed overnight. Romanian education must maintain a balance between a centralized management system and decentralization measures. The gradual introduction of decentralization measures aimed at ensuring the functional balance of the system is recommended. The decentralization process is lengthy and aims at amending and replacing previous practices.

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