

Chapter 72

School Principals’ Communication and Co- Operation Assessment: The Croatian Experience

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is conceptualized in terms of managerial behaviour in non-profit/public environments, which is often characterized by the socially constructed notion of organizational efficiency. This entails that the favourable external stakeholders’ interpretations of the principals’ activities should be ensured and associated with the usage of practices, perceived as ‘contemporary’ and ‘efficient’. There is no clear answer to the research question, if principals in EU, as managers of public/non-profit schools, adapt their behaviour in a similar manner. The empirical research is based on a survey of school principals, conducted in Croatian primary schools, as a first step toward developing a measure of school principals’ communication and co-operation practices, demonstrating their orientation toward both internal and external stakeholders in the school environment.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary school is (or should be) modeled as a (learning) community, in which each individual is empowered to meet his/her own learning objectives, by adopting customized learning tasks and development paths (Rogoff, Turkianis & Bartlett, 2001; cf. Furman, 2002). Members of such communities are expected to fit into a series of different activities, including reflective practice, organising discovery

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1624-8.ch072

and research, providing learner motivation and encouragement, evaluating and assessing achievement, etc. They need to work with other important stakeholders of the teaching process and strengthen the co-operation with relevant social structures (European Commission, 2001), as to ensure that each learner obtains key competencies for personal development and lifelong learning (European Commission, 2007). The competency-oriented education is considered as a key element in ensuring the effectiveness of the European Union in the global economy (European Parliament and Council, 2006). This has been recognized by the Croatian policy-makers, as well (Pavkov & Alfirević, 2013).

The school is, therefore, an active social actor, which needs to change along with the society, i.e. the pace of change in the school system needs to be on a par with or faster than the changes occurring in society (Stoll & Fink, 2000). Nevertheless, the pace of contemporary social and economic changes is so immense that school systems need to find new ways of meeting their requirements while simultaneously avoiding the loss of their identity. This has led to a broad range of educational system reforms during the last several decades, aiming at the preparation of individuals for challenges of high performance in modern society (Koludrović, 2013). At the other hand, it seems that the reforms, in the Croatian case, are being continuous¹ and repeatedly implemented from the start, upon each change of government or even appointment of a new minister.

Apart from the political 'triggers' for reforms and their implementations, the education professionals are well aware that any reform should be driven by the orientation of curricula toward the acquisition of competencies (learning outcomes), as well as the focusing of teaching the pupils. Instead of emphasizing facts to be learned, the teaching needs to focus on humanist, constructive and competence principles. This requires the teachers to assume the role of facilitators and leaders (Harris, 2004), as well as critical and reflective practitioners while the school and its culture should be transformed into ideal teaching/learning community.

However, it appears that practical results achieved thus far have been insufficient. In this chapter, the educational results will be interpreted from the outlook of the school system in the Republic of Croatia, as a recent member of the European Union (since 2013). In a long strive to adapt to the European tendencies in education and a history of educational reforms, the Croatian school system is still centralised, with the relevant ministry (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports – MSES), being in charge of the most significant decision-making processes. This can be confirmed by the low results of school autonomy over resource allocation and, especially, over curricula and assessment practices (OECD, 2013, 131-132). Principals are expected to implement the decisions at the operational level (at schools), irrespective of the fact that school boards are formally empowered for decision-making at the school level. This is also incompatible with the notion of educational leadership, which implies that principals should be able to adapt to their local environment/community, instead of serving as a 'transmission' of centralized educational policies. Such an approach has been introduced throughout the world, since the 1990s (Hanson, 1998).

In Croatian schools, the lack of professionalization of the principal role also comes into play. The principal positions are, as a rule, filled with teaching staff, who were not guaranteed that their previous jobs will be available if they are not re-elected into the principal position by the school board. Therefore, considerable effort was invested in organizational and other political processes, required to remain as a principal until the retirement and avoid unemployment. Following the recent amendments to legal regulations, principals are now able to return to their previous teaching positions, upon the expiry of their mandate. Nevertheless, previous practices considerably negatively impacted the schools, as individual principals used to "hang on" to their jobs, without being subject to a systematic evaluation of the

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