THE SCHOOL – FROM EDUCATIONAL SERVICES DISTRIBUTOR TO LEARNING COMMUNITY

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Although is a key institution in the community, involved in the social and economic development of the region, by providing quality educational services, the school cannot develop today without building relations with the authorities, with the parents, the NGOs or with the representatives of public institutions. This article aims to present the results of a research, starting form the question: is it possible to extend the learning communities from the school to local community level in Romania (by involving all relevant actors in this process: headmasters and principals, teachers, students, parents, NGO representatives, representatives of the City Council, other public institutions)? The focus group method and the analysis of empirical data, collected from 25 directors of representatives schools in terms of management and quality of teaching, led to the conclusion that, although invested with the same social roles, schools operate in different communities and the level of development depends on the community's resources, but also on the type of management adopted by the school. The headmaster of the school should be a reflexive and self-reflexive leader, a process that will lead to a permanent self evaluation, that will make him understand that himself/herself can benefit from opportunities for personal and professional development, to recognize the dynamic potential of others in decision making. Communities in Romania need to make all the efforts to become true communities, to discover the common areas where people must work together in order to identify the specific needs the most efficient and effective directions to be followed in social and professional life.

Today we are concentrating more and more on the need to switch from the focus on the individual learning (the individual – lonely seeker of knowledge) to the social learning (the individual as a part of a community).It brings into question the positive impact of the relationship that the individual has with others, with the environment, with the socio-cultural context. The individual is essentially a social being, learning is occurring through interaction with others, learning with them and from them. In other words, we speak about moving from the "*Age of the Individual to the Era of Community*" (Feldman, 2000). It is clear in this respect, the need to extend the educational field school organization to other educational agents.

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The school operates in a broad social context, composed of global society, as a global social system (national, specific to each state). The influences of this context on the educational institutions are materialized in the finality of education (goals and objectives), in the content of the disciplines, in the organization of the education system and institutions, in the legal and administrative regulations. But the school works within the immediate social context, in a local and zonal community, that has a set of expectations that the school should respond to. Today, the school is a key institution in the community, related to other organizations that can contribute to social and economic development of the region. Therefore, the school must become a service provider, effective and efficient, aiming professional and social integration, training people to be active citizens, civic-minded: it transfers knowledge, develops skills, rules, recognized and accepted social values; on the other hand the school has an internal logic of development, with its own norms and values, with its own system of organization.

School development should be seen in at least two perspectives: that of efforts made by the community, as a whole, in order to support development (active authorities, people involved, the level of increased investment in infrastructure, in general, and school infrastructure, in particular, allocated budgets, etc.) and that of the school's efforts to adapt to the requirements of the community: participatory management, cooperation with authorities and parents, teachers implication and adequate training programs.

On November 6th 2008 during the European Conference of Poitiers „*Gouvernance et performance des établissements scolaires en Europe”*, promoted by the French Presidency of the EU, it has put into evidence a series of topics which are common to all the school systems in Europe: the relations between school and territory in order to promote a high quality of education, according to an approach of inclusion and of equal opportunities for all; the real meaning of the school autonomy process; the role of parents as stakeholders; the weakness of evaluation culture and mechanisms as well as of the self-evaluation processes related to the teaching staff. Certainly, the two main areas of research in education to the managerial and leadership models and the conditions for development of schools are *School Effectiveness* and *School Improvement*. In recent years, a new paradigm called "School Governance" or „Educational Governance" (Unesco, 2008), alongside others mentioned, is featuring the educational systems, driven by the approach of "*Public Governance*" (Osborne, 2010).

These issues were part of the research within a Comenius project, Lifelong Learning Programme, called *School Governance to build a Learning Community* (SgoLC)), implemented in partnership with universities and schools from Italy, Greece, Sweden, Holland and Romania, between 2010 and 2012. Starting from the idea that each and every school should be a learning community, it came down to the conclusion that the education systems need school leaders with pedagogical and managerial skills at very high level. The specific objective of the SgoLC was to increase the competencies of the school leaders, in order to develop and promote a learning community.

The concept of Learning Community is defined in literature in many ways starting at the end of 20th century, according to different parameters, today having multiple nuances and being addapted to different components of our professional and personal life.

If we look at the many definitions of the concept of Learning Community in the literature, we see that there are some common features, regardless of the perspective chosen: *a group of people sharing emotions, values, beliefs,*

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common interests, are involved in cooperative and creative activities, in achieving a common goal, learning from each other, sharing their own experiences.

Most of the approaches focus on the education, where learning is the main purpose. There are countries where the education system values the Learning Communities for a long time (USA, UK, Australia, and Europe).

In the context of schools in Romania, referring to the Learning Communities, we consider two situations: within the students community (in a class or across multiple classes) or within the teachers community. Each of them can be divided and organized in other Learning Communities.

For example, in the first category we can speak of Learning Communities of students passionate about a certain subject (mathematics, astronomy, computer science, physics, English, theater, etc.). In Romania there are classes of excellence, on different subjects, for exceptional students, operating in the formal context, but mostly in a non-formal one, outside the classroom activity.

Regarding the teachers, we can talk about Learning Communities according to the specialties, communities that can be organized both at school levels or at local or national level. The education system in Romania gives the teachers the possibility to participate, every few months, to meetings at the municipal, county and national level, where, within true Learning Communities teachers express their views, share their experiences on a theme established upfront. More common at university level, Learning Communities from different areas share their ideas, experiences, talk and debate different issues with the help of the internet networks. Existing e-learning platforms enable communication by video and audio means, facilitating interaction.

It is more difficult to talk about Learning Communities that include the decision making staff (headmasters, deputy directors, heads of department). The existence of such Learning Communities depends on the organizational culture of the institution.

School, as an organization, is focused both on the task, on the learning activity and on the person, during the learning process. The two features, are not contradictory to one another, but are mutually conditioned. Interaction between educational activity and the learner is even stronger as the educational process is more personalized and individualized. The more active, participatory and stimulating is the school board, the better the results are anticipated. The better the collective and individual values blend, the more stimulating for the individual is teamwork, the higher performance will be reached in the education system.. Under this type of organizational culture each employee depends on the others, interacting to achieve a common task.

If power is centralized and the manager is power and control oriented, it is very difficult to talk about Learning Communities. If we speak about a person-oriented culture, where the qualities and professional skills matter more than the status given by a hierarchical position, then this is possible because maximizing the potential of individuals is one of the core values of the organization. It's a team culture that is an interaction between collective values (such as cooperation, identification with organization goals, teamwork, collective mobilization) and individual values (valuing individual autonomy and individual freedom). Management is flexible and stimulating, based on the values of confidence in man, in his creative abilities and self-control. Delegation of powers and responsibilities in the work teams is an important strategy, specific to participatory management.

Successful management of educational and social issues identified by the school is dependent on the degree to which the school is responsible for its management. Schools also depend on the social environment in terms of obtaining material, human, resources or information resources.

The basis for our research study was the following questions: can we talk about the extension of Learning Communities at local communities level in Romania (by involving all relevant actors in this process, managers, teachers, students, parents, NGO representatives, representatives of the Local Council, of administrative and other public institutions)?

Method

Our study was conducted only in schools and colleges, in the north-west and center region of Romania. The research focused in the first instance, on the way that school is perceived as an active actor within the community, by the headmasters, teachers, students and parents. Opinions were collected through focus-group method, in an effort to understand different perspectives of groups / different categories involved in school life. However, by using this method we aimed to clarify the quantitative information already accumulated from legal and administrative documents about organizing of schools and their relationship with the local community. Each focus group, lasting about 120 minutes, was conducted by two people: a facilitator, responsible to ask questions and guide the discussion and an assistant, responsible for recording responses from the computer and report preparation.

The second stage of the research considered the analysis of empirical data gathered from the workshops (inductive method) carried out in January 2012, when 25 representative directors of schools, in terms of management and quality of teaching, have shared their experience, presented study cases, have examined specific issues that were debated in plenary, proposing ways to improve the relationship between schools and local community.

Results

Data from focus group interviews were quantified and interpreted in the project, and they can be found on the official website of the project. We will not dwell long on a detailed analysis of each question. But we will summarize the key issues. The questions that teachers, parents and pupils had to answer were the following: *Is there anything that can be done in order to improve the relationship between schools and local community? How do you see the role and activities of your own category within a more lively and participative school? Which abilities should a school leader have in order to give a positive contribution to school life and to the improvement and the learning and recognition processes? Which skills do you think are needed for the principal's closest co-workers?*

In Romania, the local community is perceived primarily as a geographical concept, defined as a physical space and human relations based on mutual support between different institutions is just beginning to crystallize. However, responses of the majority emphasized the need for complementarities between the various educational and social services, between organizations operating in the community: extracurricular activities that might develop professional and social skills of pupils achieved through joint activities and projects through partnerships between schools , local councils, businesses, NGOs; promoting performance in community volunteer activities; providing scholarships for performance students or

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social cases; meetings between parents, teachers, counselors, school mediators.

Regarding the manager's role in opening school towards the local community, respondents stressed the need to combine strong management skills with a deep pedagogical culture. School, as an organization, in order to achieve its objectives, needs an appropriate management system. In the same time, managers must be formal and informal community leaders, responsible for relationships with parents and community. School management must ensure the school functioning and its development as an open system, found in relationship with its external environment, with the community and not only. In order to achieve its objectives the school is forced to raise, allocate and use a diverse range of resources: material, financial, human, information and time. The school leader must have an attitude of self-evaluation, that will always make him/her to analyze his/her own work, to understand that himself/herself can benefit from opportunities for personal and professional development, to recognize the dynamic potential of others in decision making. Thus, he must accept a collegial relationship with teachers (leadership, power and decision).

All these topics have been detailed through presentations of study cases and interventions of the 25 directors, known for efficient management and for the high level of socio-professional integration of graduates.

The most debated issue was the context in which the Romanian school is nowadays: after a long period in which decisions were centralized and supervised in a center of power, now has passed to the delegation of responsibilities at local level. On the one hand, structures have to adapt on the fly, some responsibilities have been delegated, some not, on the other hand, mentalities are hard to change, people still learn to assume responsibilities. Partnership initiative, opening channels of communication between school representatives and local authorities are often approached by schools.

Lines of action proposed in this regard were, especially, those we find under the existing legislation: facilitation of children's participation in preschool education and compulsory education, developing of education programs for young parents, organizing courses for children that cannot meet the national curriculum and school dropouts in their school reintegration, organization and development of opportunities appropriate for leisure and recreation, making or taking steps to prevent early school for economic reasons.

A significant role in opening schools towards the local community is the partnership with business environment. Our study focused, as said before, on technical colleges, and each school of the analyzed ones have significant experience in this regard. Presented case studies and debates that have followed have revealed long-term effect of economic cooperation with schools: an efficient correlation between the offer and demand of the labor market (network linking schools: structured into channels, profiles, specialties and professional qualifications adapted to the local and national education needs), social integration through differentiation of graduates, depending on skills and options, the transmission of values such as responsibility, respect for work and the values produced by it. In accordance with the law, businesses can participate in the management of educational institutions by appointing representatives in the board of the school. The following joint activities have been identified: visiting the companies, sponsorships provided by businesses for various events, the participation of representatives of economic agents in classes that aim the economic education of students, presentation of various professions, involving students

in productive activities to practice the skills and abilities learned and developed in school, professional counseling. In technical colleges, collaboration can be extended by providing facilities and equipment necessary to practice skills and abilities, by organizing training sessions, internships, meetings with the management structure of the companies, with role models of professional success, by organizing job fairs for graduates, by conducting training programs for employees in schools and for teachers in economic units, by implementing, in partnership, human resources development plans.

The situation is good in the schools that have made clear their lines of development, whose representatives (headmasters, teachers) have taken initiatives to communicate and initiate partnerships. Resources were directed to those who know their needs and promote their interests. Schools, competing for the provision of quality educational services, in order to attract students need more and more to develop relationships with authorities, parents, NGOs or other entities representing the local community.

Conclusions

The existence of an effective learning community involves adopting a governance model in which each relevant actor (parent, student, headmaster, teacher, other external stakeholders) play a key role in the community and contribute to the cultural, social and economic development.

When comparing Romania to other countries (Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden), there are some issues that need to be addressed. In all these countries, the school principals (directors) have a leading role, with lots of responsibilities, but also with a fundamental role in decision making. While in Greece, Italy and Romania, teachers are poorly involved in this decision process, and pupils and parents less than that, the Netherlands and Sweden may be true examples. We can talk about real professional learning communities, where teachers can influence the decision-making process, by linking theory with practice, through team work. Students and parents also have an active role in this respect (by representatives of associations of students and parents). Other external stakeholders collaborate and cooperate as well with schools on various issues and are involved in developing new curriculum, participate in events, meetings, open days etc.

Communities in Romania need to make all the efforts to become true communities, to discover the common areas where people must work together in order to identify the specific needs the most efficient and effective directions to be followed in social and professional life.

Proper development of the school within the community context requires an effort of will of the people involved, but also a managerial option. Although invested with the same social roles, schools operate in different communities, thus the degree of development depends on community's resources, on the management style adopted by the school leader, but also on the needs of the educational service users: children, families, adults. We can consider a school as being developed, if it responds to a great range of needs of its clients, prepared and involved in partnerships, flexible, with well trained and motivated employees.

Empirical analysis has showed that the development and formation of a true learning community in the local community include: identifying all the relevant actors that make up the network and are involved in joint educational services, identifying the educational needs of the community,

defining operating procedures and conditions of involvement, choosing communication and transparency tools, defining and adopting management control means, in order to measure the level of objectives achievement and evaluation of the effectiveness of the system.

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