School as a centre of socialization – a challenge for education policy and law

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Schools should become the centres of socializations for students and the hearts of the communities.

Socialization as the central process in education

Socialization has been and is one of the central processes in education. The difference of this term in different times and countries lays mainly in the role and place of the student in education process. According to one paradigm a student is an object in service of the aims and needs of the society, another paradigm considers student as an active citizen.

Schools were founded to prepare young people for different roles – factory schools to prepare workers and private schools for future members of parliament. Schools choose fitting pupils and shape them according to the curriculum. Schools try to find similar students to teach them in the same way. Such approach still appears in many countries (Germany and others) even though the country has actually adopted a new, 21st century paradigm of socialization. In the system where children have to choose between academic and practical education in a very early stage of their studies (before 9th grade) the risk of labelling is vivid and may lead to the same effect which schooling according to the old paradigm had – shaping pupils for a certain role not giving them the belief of variety of chances in life. Such situation is criticized by humanists and socialization is often found to hinder the development of individuals. Therefore this kind of choices in education system must be deliberated very carefully and attention should be paid on measures for avoiding the kind of negative consequences described above.

According to the new paradigm socialization is a reciprocal process, where a person influences his environment and adapts in the same time. Personal growth is related with the development of the community and society. Schools and education are meant to support pupils to become active citizens, self-conscious individuals who have an opportunity and ability to make conscious choices in life. The difference between people and the individuality of each person are considered as beneficial and necessary entities which enable people to supplement each other and add value to the society. This approach can be taught in a mixed group.

Because of this shift of paradigms we can not use best practices and research results from the countries where previous paradigm prevails as schools, environment and objectives are different. Otherwise we will end up in a situation where we use 20th century teaching and leading methods in the 21st century school. Measures have to taken in politics and law of education to improve the situation.

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Changes in society as challenges to schools

Society has changed rapidly. Previous centres of socialization like family, church and work have lost their role. Many families have only one child and a single parent and they live separately from their relatives. Many people are not related with church. The work has remained only for grownups (but not for all of them) and not all the companies pay attention to the working culture and social relations of workers and many jobs and working environments do not support or even not allow socialization. Children do not go to work and so they cannot socialize at work anymore. The proportion of immigrants is approaching critical limits. Children spend most of their time at school. They go to school to meet their friends. School may be "a melting-pot" of different groups and a tool for facilitating integration in society. When people participate in joint activities, they trust each other more and gain shared understanding, joint meaning and values. Development of transport, media and internet has made us global citizens. It means that we have to cooperate locally to be competitive in the world (glocalization). Networking can refrain nationalism and racism as antithesis to globalization and individualism (Carnoy, 2005).

Most of the information is available on the Internet and children are very advanced users of ICT. The richness of the information available on the Internet and children's ability to find it contain a chance and challenge to educators. On the one hand it is possible to use these to refocus the school education from teaching the facts as such on the ways of finding them. The ICT skills of pupils give educators a chance to use these to develop and improve students' creativity, problem solving and communication skills and cooperation. On the other hand not all the information available on the Internet or elsewhere is reliable. Alongside with previously mentioned skills and abilities attention should be paid on critical thinking of a student. In order to manage well and be an active member of today's information society it is an essential ability. That means that teachers and other educators must improve their skills in Internet and information management as well.

New knowledge accrues every day and it is impossible and useless to teach everything beforehand. By refocusing the content of education from fact teaching and learning on developing skills and abilities needed for a global citizen of 21st century and directing attention on personal development of a student, also the grading has to change. It means that the role of grading based on controlling the knowing of facts should decrease as it hinders courage and creativity and more attention has to be paid to formative assessment.

If teachers and parents do not understand these changes and insist pupils to cram facts, children will begin to hate the school and start to socialize on streets and in the internet outside the control and support of adults. When schools do not settle in the changed environment, education may cause social problems. Children learn to demand more (they know, what they need and are not satisfied with worse conditions or lower salary) but are not able to fulfil a job where they can earn enough money.

In order to make the shift real, parents have to become a part of it. At the moment the problem is that parents expect from the school what the school cannot do and do not expect what the school really has to do. This is based on their own experience from the earlier period.

„Most of what the general public understands about school comes from the lens of their own experience. We can't settle for having a „good enough" system. The adage that, „it was good enough for me, it's good enough for them" will only cement outdated thinking of what teaching and learning can look like." (Wessling, 2012). So the challenge here is about making parents, and that means actually the whole society, aware of what should education nowadays provide for children. The other challenge concerning parents is dealing with the ones who do not fulfil their parental obligations. Sometimes schools fail to notice or to provide appropriate help and support to the students who do not have supporting homes and families.

These tendencies demand an education which is in accordance with the situation, the needs of people in it and the needs of society. The new paradigm enables to handle these challenges and to change obstacles into resources. Disintegration of the society may be the basis for the development on the new stage. All these challenges must be dealt with not only on school level but on political and legal as well.

Challenges to education law and policy

Education policy and law may not remain too much back (for instance the proportion of tertiary graduates in management positions has declined in the majority of EU Member States (Key Data, 2012, p.180), what shows, that schools have lost the connection with the society) and hinder the development or outrun the development of the society as a whole.

Some scientific research about schools' quality may hinder the development of the society by taking into account only academic achievement (the objective of the past paradigm) and not the success in life or other important qualitative figures of education and school. Parents and politicians may get a false picture of the situation of education and postpone necessary changes which would be needed to provide children with a good education. The exam-result based listing of schools is tightly related to the grading system itself. As long as students and parents see that the future opportunities of the child somehow depend on exam results, the lists gain attention and are composed because final exam grades are a good and objective criteria for it. The solving of the problem and changing the system therefore is a question of political and legal level. One of the options thereto is making the final exams optional like in Finland – the state supports studying but the students decide when and which exams they take. It would be a part of the shift of responsibilities supporting self-control and self-consciousness of students.

It has to be understood that people are not equal but they are equitable (PISA, 2010). "Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion)" (OECD, 2012). Education policy and law should take into consideration, that children are different with different needs, interests and abilities. Equal education is unfair and increases contradictions between people. It is state's responsibility to ensure equal opportunities for gaining good education to all students.

Many countries have already changed their official education policy. Unfortunately the changes appear only on paper so far. The problem here is not only the fact that practical changes take more time and need some settlement. One could say that the changes cannot come into real so far as the governments' approach becomes comprehensive.

Creating and using exam-result lists to evaluate schools' quality will not stop before final exams end to be the main way for evaluating and measuring students' success in school. So will the equity principle not come into actual effect before the teachers' education provides teachers with values, knowledge and skills needed for implementing it, the school management supports the concept of common values and student as the most important subject in education process, the socio-economic circumstances and risks are dealt with effectively. So far there has been acknowledgment of a need for change and the key principles and values of the reform. Some practical steps have been taken as well but the whole process has been hectic and lacking a systematic approach. (OECD, 2011).

School is not merely meant for preparing pupils for examinations. Modern school should be the centre of socialization as the school is an integral part of the community and local life and at some points it even plays a central role in (cultural) development of the community.

"Higher education institutions are not only sites of community formation but, as in the past, also continue to act as centers of cultural leadership." (Carnoy, 2005). Learning maths, languages and other subjects should support socialization with corresponding environment, school culture and shared responsibility and cooperation between teachers, pupils and their parents (Ginter, 2013).

If both levels of socialization – the inside level (learning process, school culture, leadership of the school) and outside level (school as a part of the community) – meet the requirements of modern society, the socialization is real. The community supports the school and the school supports the community. It is possible when school has a school district. Teachers and pupils participate in community activities and school is open for the community. There are already schools which involve parents and community by teaching parents some issues related to the development of the society and science, e. g environment protection. This is done through teaching the children. That means that the curriculum is not oriented merely to the students and the output is not only the knowledge of the students but also the development of the community. The other way of involvement is actual and direct cooperation between teachers and parents. In many schools it is already successfully implemented by having parents as mentors or assistant teachers for pupils.

To make these examples common and bring schools on the same level in that sense, thereby guaranteeing students the equal opportunities in education, some political and legal steps have to be taken for involving parents and community: who get salary from the school, who participate in staff meetings, etc.

To support integrated comprehensive education and the role of socialization in it finding a common nominator for all people who play an active and important role in education of the child could be very helpful. Separating teachers and supporting personnel (social pedagogues and others) separates teaching subjects like mother tongue or maths and socialization (teaching students). Common nominator together with other measures could be one step which takes the education closer to the above mentioned objectives.

We held above that school is an integral part of the community, it is therefore important to think about the territorial-administrative system together with the school reform. For example school districts (in US and in other countries) have less opportunities to support network of socialization than local municipalities which deal with social affairs, medicine, sports, culture, vocational education etc, like in Finland where there is only one level of local government.

It is important to find a new balance between competition and cooperation. Competition between schools for better students does not give good results (PISA, 2010). "Providing full parental school choice can result in segregating students by ability, socio economic background and generate greater inequities across education systems" (OECD, 2012). "Policies need to ensure that disadvantaged schools prioritise their links with parents and communities and improve their communication strategies to align school and parental efforts. The more effective strategies… encourage individuals from the same communities to mentor students. Building links with the communities around schools, both business and social stakeholders, can also strengthen schools and their students." (OECD, 2012). Many states already have strategies to support weaker schools and students and through this weaker communities.

Another issue concerning socialization and related students' abilities, values and skills development is home schooling. According to the law valid at the moment, a parent's wish and application are sufficient grounds for putting a student on home schooling. As many abilities and skills, including self-consciousness and self-control, can be effectively developed in group, the regulation and possible restrictions on home schooling should be deliberated in order to ensure home schooled student's proper education and development.

Despite tight relations between schools and the community and the dependence of school from legal and political system and decisions, the success and failure starts from leading of the school. Paradigm shift presumes the shift from authoritarian management to participative leadership. This means new role models, standards and by-laws for headmasters and schools.

"There is a groundswell favouring more participative and meaningful organisational environments". (Woods, 2012, p 15). Parents and students should be involved and participate in the management of schools. Their competence should not be limited to only choosing a school without any possibilities to influence its development and participate in decision making later on. The other danger is to add new responsibilities on principals, social workers or teachers which they are not ready to carry out without cooperation and changes in labour distribution. Some principals, social workers and teachers may be supermen, but we cannot expect it from all and build up a system based on their experience. Instead of finding "supermen" we have to improve teacher education in universities, courses for headmasters and teachers, support measures and overcome the barriers between theory and practice.

Decentralization by delegating more responsibilities on school level – principal and teachers – may be a part of supporting socialization and new paradigm approach. It would be a shift of responsibility from a state to local and professional level as above described examination change. This is one of the main principles in Finland's education system. According to this kind of example decentralization could be a solution as a shift from a rule driven to a results-driven system with "value-added schooling, benchmarking and finding best practice (Marsh, 2000, p. 128). But it is crucial not to use this practice without a good preparation and in system with other supporting measures. For instance the ongoing reform in Estonia may lead to over-decentralization and rather undermine the improvement and the goals of the system reform. Moderate centralization may be needed and in early stages of decentralization even stronger control could be appropriate. In both situations there is a danger to move to the other extreme.

The changes in education law may go in three directions: changes in court practice, changes in national legislation (first abolish previous restrictions necessary for the previous paradigm, then rule new arrangement) and in international policy and legislation (EU, European Council, UNESCO, UN). On all the levels when centralizing or decentralizing the risk described above has to be taken into account.

Conclusion

Teachers as mentors support pupils to build up their own world, based on their identity and values. It means that all teachers should also have their own holistic picture of the world and they should understand their role in the world.

> "… we have the opportunity to consciously shape educational policy – at school, local and national levels – by understanding and growing the future in the most fertile ground we can find" (Woods, 2011, p 6-7).

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