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DECENTRALIZATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY SCHOOLS by Genc Alimehmeti

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Introduction

The school produces public value. Its mission, governance, accountability and management must be built around this principle. The high rate of society development pushes schools to radically evolve and adapt to the new ways in which knowledge is created, transferred and implemented. Necessary changes to the mission of schools require profound changes to the overall educational system and schools management.

In developed countries, the adoption of the new public management has given rise to a new role of the State, focusing on the redimension of direct control – on the basis of principles of vertical and horizontal subsidiarity – towards the use of financing and assessment as levers of public control.

The ‘control at a distance’ model highlights the role of the school’s institutional autonomy

and the importance of accountability systems in giving responsibility on schools' strategic decisions. Autonomous schools can provide more entrepreneurial actions, timely responsiveness to the needs, equity, sustainability and operating efficiency.

Governance and accountability constitute two central perspectives of analysis that must bond together in order to sustain schools in creating public value. The educational policy transfer of the last decades in East European Countries (EEC) has introduced freedom and autonomy for schools. However, such changes in the administrative culture of a large and diversified education system are neither quickly nor easily achieved (OECD 1998). The autonomy is accompanied by the introduction of accountability by setting standards, assessing academic achievement in core subjects (reading, writing, mathematics and science) and the evaluation of schools with respect to their ability to put all students in a position to achieve better performance.

Centralization vs. decentralization

For decades, West and East European countries have been subject to legal arrangements seeking to reform their education systems: governance, funding and accountability transforming the way public schools operate and making them more directly accountable to students, parents, and communities.

There is a whole body of literature analyzing school systems and providing in depth analysis on characteristics of each system, confirming similarities on the tendency of decentralizing state control, while there are also similarities among East European countries due to the inherited school system during communism.¹ As in Soviet education, ideology was made central to the purpose and functioning of the school, and the State claimed a monopoly on the right to educate, as a concomitant to its control of newspapers and other forms of information. Thus, the EEC opted to centralize control, ensuring the unity of the nation and the uniformity of the service. Managerial functions, governing and monitoring are situated under the authority of an education ministry or department. At a local level, schools officials operate with greatly confined possibility for ingenuity and are granted only limited on day-to-day operations management power.²

By contrast, a decentralized scheme consists of limited control by the government and the dispersing of the freedom to exercise considerable power over the characteristics of the educational system to other levels: regional, provincial, district, city, a single school, or a cluster of schools.

In pragmatic terms, both centralized and decentralized elements characterize

education systems. While the Western tendency favors decentralization, other partially decentralized systems choose to preserve certain powers at the central level whilst allotting selected powers at the local level. Engagement in a process of reforming towards decentralization of the education system calls for identification of the system components which are best managed at which level: local or central, acknowledging the actual circumstances within the state and the aims of the restructuring. Some reasons as to why states engage into decentralization reforms are: existence of ideas which consider decentralization as opportunity for money-saving; dissatisfaction with a mostly centralized educational system; desire for a more efficient and flexible system capable of being governed at the local level; or inclination to conform with the tendency to decentralization in other states; as well as willingness to give voice to the local level. In this whole process of reforming, it is generally recommended to pre-define the objectives of the decentralization at the outset and refer to this during the process.³

All Eastern European school systems in this study have a common factor: the influence of the Soviet political system during the communist period. The communist system radically changed the educational system of the East European countries. Its ideology considered schools as an important factor in shaping society, thus it had to be controlled. After 1950, most of the states affected altered their educational system towards a full centralization from the state. In some countries the changes burst in many directions, such as the total cleansing of the academic staff in Romania in 1948. However, there were cases where the application of the Soviet rules was not totalitarian. For instance, Bulgaria managed to maintain some of its 'traditions' because of its results in education, although it did not deviate from the main governance model of the educational system.⁴

After decades of the prevailing control by the State of the educational system, the fall of the communist regime resulted in a complete restructuring of EEC educational systems. Questions of decentralization, freedom of the educational system and school autonomy become prominent resulting in an alteration from the political administrative central management scheme into a slightly decentralized system. This change stipulated practical and functional autonomy of schools and moved the decision-making power to the local and regional authorities.⁵

Despite the common reforms towards a quasi-market, three models of educational policy emerge from the analysis of Western and Eastern European countries.

1. Centralized: financing for primary and secondary education remains highly centralized, provided mainly by the central government. Local governments

are responsible for the financing of basic school maintenance.

2. Partially Decentralized: the government delegates budget allocation to local government, which are responsible for schools' management.
3. Decentralized: the powers and responsibilities of local government shift from direct management of schools to coordination, support, and supervision. State agencies assess school performance and audit spending. While schools become secondary budget holders able to manage independently. They also have the ability to apply for alternative funds from civil society and other stakeholders.

Shifting from a centralized towards a decentralized model entails profound changes to the governance and accountability of schools. While in a centralized system, school performance is assured by the direct control of the State on resources allocation, decentralization requires more control on school outcomes, taking a monitoring position assuring the enhancement of school performance.

The need for accountability

Nowadays, in many countries, state control is limited to the assessment of standards of academic achievement in core subjects (reading, writing, mathematics and science) and the evaluation of schools aiming to improve students' performance.⁶

Reforms such as No Child Left Behind (in the U.S.) or the Every Child Matters (in the U.K.) are based on centralized learning tests involving every school. In England, the test results are published in a ranking that is not very different from how one presents the rankings in the football league. The results are disseminated through the national and local newspapers and are used to decide the support and resources to be given to schools, or to help families in choosing the proper school for their children. Inspections that OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) performs systematically in every school are easily accessible via the Internet.

In the U.S., new legislation requires individual states, districts, and schools to publish data on school performance of students with analysis on the annual progress by gender, race, disability, income, migrant status and knowledge of English. Data accountability systems are used to provide financial incentives to schools, concurrently also to punish schools that prove unable to structurally improve the results.

The survey OECD-Pisa (2007, 2010) accounts for accountability systems developed

by participating countries. The shift of the focus from mere control over resources or over teaching methods, to the students' outcome has led many countries to the establishment of standards to evaluate schools. The new mechanisms of centralized evaluation of learning are part of a larger complex system of evaluation of schools and staff. The rationale of the assessment and the type of instruments used vary between countries, but we can distinguish four mechanisms:

- national examinations;
- standardized tests on the level of learning of students in reading, mathematics and science, but also in other core subjects;
- external evaluations of schools by the public inspectorate and sometimes by entities non-governmental entities;
- mandatory self-assessment can be carried out for the purpose of diagnosis and continuous improvement.

Each of these mechanisms can be found implemented either alone or in association with others, highlighting the multidimensionality of the evaluation approaches of measurement and results.

From the report of OECD countries emerge different practices on how the results of the evaluations are used. For some countries, the centralized collection of learning is primarily a mechanism, which delivers evidence to the political system and provides schools in return with the objective feedback on their situation with reference to the national standards and best practices. The aim is to identify problems and encourage teachers and schools to develop learning environments deemed more equitable and productive.

In other cases, the results also pursue the goal of producing comparable information on the performance of schools, which are made available to families and the entire community. Some countries, among which are Sweden, United States and United Kingdom, are characterized by a high number of schools that make accessible to families and other stakeholders comparative information on school performance of their students compared to national averages or local. On the opposite side are placed countries such as Austria, Greece and Italy.

Additionally, the accountability systems differ with regard to the prediction of the consequences associated with the results of centralized assessments.⁷ Assessment may be associated with a system of rewards and sanctions (consequential systems) or

the assessment can only have the purpose of communicating the results of the school (reporting systems). The first are systems with high-powered incentives such as prizes or in financial penalties (both for schools and for the leaders and teachers), but also social recognition, designed to push schools to achieve high performance.

The literature has emphasized the role of centralized assessments as surrogates of prices within institutional education defined '*quasi-market*.'⁸

Numerous studies have documented that the results-based accountability implies an active role in demand on the assumption that providing families and the public the results of the test can be used to compare and select schools, promotes rational choices for allocation of resources and this way provides incentives to improve yields school students.⁹

The theory of transaction costs can help to provide an explanation of the role of centralized assessments. The Nobel Prize for Economics Oliver Williamson (1979) has raised the issue of the choice of forms of government economic activity, taking into consideration bounded rationality and opportunism as potential determinants of magnitude of transaction costs. The amount of transaction costs determines comparatively the convenience of the market to the organization. The greater the amount of transaction costs, the less efficient is a particular form of government.

Bounded rationality states that, although humans behave intentionally rationally, in fact rationality is limited due to the limitations of knowledge, vision, technical skills and time to operate. Opportunism implies that human beings can behave unfairly and pursue their interests by illegal means such as deception and fraud. The presence of both of these conditions makes transactions more costly because '*buyers*' are forced to take precautions to ensure that the contracts are respected. Traditionally, in the field of education, the presence of high transaction costs suggested the bureaucratic government of the service, i.e. the coordination and control of the educational service through hierarchical instruments such as regulations, administrative procedures, rules, inspections and verifications of compliance. The bureaucracy, exercised with the typical instruments of public administration, was considered the most convenient solution that has reduced transaction costs of providing to students and families the consistency and reliability of the school service and, on the other hand, has assured teachers what to teach (curriculum), when and through which materials (compulsory textbooks). In this perspective, the state replaces teachers and families in deciding the allocation of resources and responsibilities within the system, replacing them with the public bureaucracy, which is considered a more efficient way to cope with the limits of rationality and the potential opportunism.

On the other hand, educational decentralization reforms have adopted a different perspective towards ‘quasi-markets’ based on the assumption that market mechanisms prove to be more efficient than public bureaucracies for the coordination and control of educational services.

The institutional failure of the traditional bureaucratic structure is a consequence of its low capacity to adapt to the complex needs of a rapidly changing society. In face of the rigidity of the public bureaucracy and loss of effectiveness and efficiency of schools organized within the ministerial hierarchy, the attribution of autonomy to schools represents a fundamental change in the perspective of regular educational services through market mechanisms.

In countries that have opted for autonomous systems, this has also meant greater power of choice of families and competition between public schools and private schools in attracting pupils and application for public funds. On the other hand, the capacity of schools to manage human and financial resources free from central restrictions means the ability to empower school managers and teachers through patterns of performance-based incentives, which permit aligning individual interests with the purposes of the organization.

In this context, centralized assessments, particularly standardized tests, allow lowering transaction costs for coordination and control of educational activities and external relationships between schools and families, and internally between school administrators and teachers, including leaders and school administration. Thus, the analyses of the inspection and accountability level (internal: within the school; external – at regional or local level; external – at state level) helps in understanding the level of state control and decentralization of the educational system.

Accountability for school quality in East European countries

The EEC have introduced several mechanisms of accountability, mainly referred to school’s inspection by State inspectorate and unified student tests. These mechanisms have been introduced with the recent decentralization of governance, in order to ensure school quality. However, there is no league table as in the case of England or the U.S.A., where this sort of classification is intended to have an impact on the popularity of schools. As funding follows pupils the intention is that schools will compete for students in order to increase the income that comes with them.

- The Bulgarian Ministry of Education has the most responsible position: it sets core curricula for compulsory general subjects, rules for assessing and

promoting pupils and for conducting tests and examinations, organization of school year, approves the list of textbooks from which the directors may choose which textbook will be used in their schools.

- The Czech Republic's external supervision of the state has been applied since 1991 within the agenda of the Czech School Inspectorate, an administrative authority that operates nation-wide. Inspections are carried out by school inspectors (responsible for the field of education), controllers (economics and other fields) and other authorized staff. In the Czech Republic, school boards play an important role in ensuring accountability by enabling parents, adult students, employees of the school and other persons to participate in a school's administration. Furthermore, the Ministry constantly invites schools to publish their self-assessments reports on their websites for better communication.
- Estonia does not organize regular supervision, but follows the priorities driven from the national tests results. The results of state exams and the number of students serve as indicators for state supervision. Media also reveal problems and weak schools. The quality of education is based on permanent self-evaluation of schools supported by the state. Each school has to present a report of self-evaluation over three years.
- Latvia does not have state supervision and accountability mechanisms for school results. Instead they focus on the accreditation system. The decision on accrediting a program is taken by the State Service of Education Quality. An educational program is accredited if its content conforms to the requirements set out in legal acts and if a positive conclusion is provided by an expert commission, set up for this purpose, on the different performance indicators of the education program.
- In Lithuania, external evaluation of all secondary and elementary school is implemented periodically and is initiated by the institution that holds the proprietary rights and obligations of the school: state level public schools, municipal institutions for municipal public schools, and the management bodies of non-state schools. A system is in place to monitor the quality of education: internal and/or external evaluation is carried out regularly, as well as accreditation of school managers and teachers and evaluation of student achievement.
- In Poland the overall responsibility for the supervision and inspection of schools is divided in three levels: internal – at school level – the headmaster, together with teachers analyze how the school functions, define exiting

problems, and prepare plans; external – the superintendent provides each school with objective, reliable information about its strong and weak sides, what aims at improving the quality; and external – the Ministry of National Education provides the superintendent with information in order to improve his work.

- In Romania, the State has the main responsibility for setting standards and evaluation of schools. County school inspectorates evaluate and monitor the performance and management of educational institutions or the performance of individual teachers, as a condition for obtaining certification. However, the external evaluation system of pre-tertiary education institutions, based on State and county school inspectorates, seems not to provide a high degree of accountability. The cases in which pre-tertiary education institutions lose their accreditation are rather exceptional.
- In Slovenia, both internal and external evaluations are used in the quality assurance system. Schools conduct internal evaluations. The quality of the provision of the educational process is measured by means of different methods of self-evaluation, while at the national level various national and international research projects measure the students' academic results. External evaluation of the education system also includes annual analysis of pupils' and students' results in external assessment at the national level; analysis of national results and indicators in comparable international research projects (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS, TALIS, SITES, CIVICS, etc.); and analysis of results of basic, developmental and applicative research projects in all areas of education co- financed by the Slovenian Research Agency.

Table 1 - East European Countries Accountability and Governance

	External Supervision (State)	External Supervision (other)	Internal Supervision (boards)	Self-Assessment	Unified Tests (State)	Unified Tests (International)
Bulgaria	X				X	
Czech Republic	X		X	X	X	X
Estonia	X				X	X
Latvia	X					
Lithuania	X	X				
Poland	X	X		X	X	X
Romania	X	X				
Slovenia	X		X	X	X	X

Overall, the analyzed EEC show differences in the features of their governance and accountability within the educational system (Table 1). While there is a common feature of external supervision by the state, there are characteristics, which show the presence of three different governance and accountability models.

1. *Centralized.* Latvia, Lithuania and Romania represent the farthest case of centralization, with no inclination towards accountability despite the control on accreditation of schools.
2. *Partially Decentralized.* Bulgaria and Estonia have reformed toward decentralization where the state assumes the overall responsibility for the supervision and inspection of schools and the accountability expands to the use of national unified tests and international tests.
3. *Decentralized.* The Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia have achieved a high rate of decentralization and accountability. Their educational systems are based on a three-tier governance model. The State is mainly responsible to draw up national curricula, promote further development of schools, and monitor them. The responsibility of school resources (financial and other) is shifted to the local level. School governing bodies have autonomy in managing their funds and in planning their activities. This ‘multi-level governance’ model requires a high level of accountability in order to coordinate different stakeholders in managing schools. Thus, the internal and external assessments take a fundamental role in enhancing school performance.

Conclusions

In the late 1980s and 1990s, starting from the U.S. and West European, than to East European countries, there is a common tendency to decrease the level of centralization of educational system, using a variety of approaches to regulatory flexibility. The push toward flexibility stems from the belief that autonomy is an important spur to school improvement. Freed from barriers posed by rules about how they organize and deliver education, schools can design services that best meet the needs of their students. To foster such discretion, schools agree to be more accountable for performance in return for autonomy. Supporters of decentralization also cite the increased effectiveness associated with organizational efforts to devolve authority as well as popular support for less intruding government.

Educational systems show a clear path-dependency to countries’ economic, political

and social history.¹⁰ Thus, despite the common path of decentralization after the fall of communism in East Europe, there seem to exist different models of governance and accountability adopted in different countries. While some countries (i.e. Latvia, Romania) still show a highly centralized system, others, have increasingly changed their systems towards a multi-level governance educational system (i.e. Slovenia; Czech Republic) with a strong relationship with the demand for accountability.

Recognizing that finding a correlation between the educational system and accountability to students' performance falls outside the scope of this work, it is worth referring to the EEC results in OECD-Pisa (2010) which are well below the OECD average. An exception is Estonia, which holds excellent scores above OECD average although its educational system is partially decentralized with a less developed accountability system in comparison to other countries. . Hence, one can deduct that it takes more than decentralization and accountability to improve school effectiveness, but yet it can be one right path to follow.

Endnotes

¹ Radó 2010; see also Glenn 1995.

² Florestal & Cooper, 1997.

³ Florestal and Cooper 1997.

⁴ see Glenn 1995.

⁵ Radó 2004.

⁶ Paletta 2011.

⁷ Hanushek and Raymond 2006.

⁸ Bradley, et al. 2000, West and Pennell 2002.

⁹ Hallinger and Heck 1998, Witziers, Bosker and Krüger 2003, Fuchs and Wössmann 2007.

¹⁰ Neave 1998.

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