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Relationship management strategies in public primary schools – case study

Strategie zarządzania relacjami w publicznych szkołach podstawowych – studium przypadku

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Abstract:

Research objectives and hypothesis/research questions

To identify understanding of relationship management by school management. Research questions are: How school leader understands relationship management? How their understanding influences school practice? Research methods

Case study.

Main results

The study revealed that the public primary school lacked a dedicated stakeholder management strategy. Respondents identified several elements that, in their opinion, might reflect such a strategy. These included a school work plan, long-term collaboration, spontaneous activities, and work teams. The results revealed that the school treats stakeholder management as a random and unplanned activity, arising from any and all opportunities.

Implications for theory and practice

It is recommended to plan long-term activities based on conscious relationship management. An example would be developing a cooperation plan between the school and its stakeholders. Adopting a strategic

action plan in this area would also allow for the selection of effective relationship management strategies. The adopted plan would enable rational action in relationship management, rather than being merely a result of circumstance – that is, exploiting every opportunity that arises. It is also recommended to leverage the experiences of foreign schools in the field of stakeholder relations. This can be achieved in two ways: by inviting staff from foreign schools to visit schools in Poland or by sending staff from Polish public primary schools on internships with foreign partners.

Keywords: cooperation with community, relationship management, public organisation, primary school

Abstrakt:

Cel badań i hipotezy/pytania badawcze

Określenie rozumienia zarządzania relacjami przez kadrę zarządzającą szkołą. Pytania badawcze brzmią: Jak liderzy szkół rozumieją zarządzanie relacjami? Jak ich rozumienie wpływa na praktykę szkolną? Metody badawcze

Studium przypadku.

Główne wyniki

Badania wykazały, że publiczna szkoła podstawowa nie ma strategii zarządzania relacjami z interesariuszami jako takiej. Badani wskazali na kilka elementów, które ich zdaniem mogą odzwierciedlać taką strategię. Były to: plan pracy szkoły, długofalowa współpraca, działania spontaniczne oraz zespoły robocze. Wyniki pokazały, że szkoła traktuje zarządzanie relacjami z interesariuszami jako działanie przypadkowe i nieplanowane, wynikające z wszelkich możliwych okazji.

Implikacje dla teorii i praktyki

Zaleca się planowanie działań długoterminowych na podstawie świadomego zarządzania relacjami. Przykładem może być opracowanie planu współpracy między szkołą a jej interesariuszami. Przyjęcie strategicznego planu działania w tym zakresie pozwoliłoby również na dobór skutecznych strategii zarządzania relacjami. Przyjęty plan umożliwiłby racjonalne działania w zakresie zarządzania relacjami, a nie byłby jedynie efektem okoliczności, czyli wykorzystywania wszelkich nadarzających się okazji. Zaleca się również wykorzystanie doświadczeń szkół zagranicznych w zakresie relacji z interesariuszami. Można to zrobić na dwa sposoby: zapraszając kadrę szkół zagranicznych do wizyt w szkołach w Polsce lub wysyłając kadrę polskich publicznych szkół podstawowych na staże u partnerów zagranicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: współpraca ze społecznością lokalną, zarządzanie relacjami, organizacja publiczna, szkoła podstawowa

Introduction

Over the last almost three decades, schools introduced a number of significant changes in all areas of their operation. These changes were, among others, the result of reforms introduced by the state, which, on the one hand, stimulated the improvement of work through the introduction of new teaching tools and methods, computerisation and schools' access to the Internet, and on the other hand, they imposed on schools the need, among others, to maintain various reports and activity register. The reforms also resulted in encouraging schools to build relationships within the surrounding community. The requirement placed on educational institutions within the reform of school evaluation system (Ministry of Education Regulations, 2009) caused schools to pay significant attention to building cooperative relationships with different partners in school community environment. It became especially important to develop leadership competencies of building and managing relations within schools but also competencies of managing and leading relationships with different stakeholders in school community (Giles, 2019).

School principals, including those of public primary schools, endeavoured to establish relationships in the community. They also created conditions for teachers, parents and graduates to build such cooperation.

1. Theoretical context

The actions taken by schools to build cooperative relationships with the community have significantly expanded the group of external stakeholders. As a result, the introduction of the new requirements changed not only the school's attitude towards cooperation with parents, but also encouraged teachers to cooperate with different partners in the community, the school to build relationships with various types of organisations (e.g. commercial, public, NGOs), schools to build relationships between themselves and to develop international cooperation (establishing cooperation with schools from abroad). The above-mentioned activities also resulted in the creation of local and regional systems and networks of cooperation in education (Bednarczyk, 2000). Positive actions in the field of building relationships included granting great powers to the parent board representing parents of children attending educational institutions. The requirement of establishing the parent board imposed on every school forced educational institutions to focus particularly on building relationships with parents.

The dynamic environment in which public primary schools operate and the high demands placed on these institutions meant that they needed extensive support. On the one hand, as researchers emphasise, public primary schools carry out additional tasks resulting from the dynamic development of society. They often act as a cultural centre, technological centre, social welfare facility, centre for statistical and educational research, they carry out tasks in the field of adult education, teacher training, and also constitute a place of integration for the local community (Mazurkiewicz, 2010). On the other hand, they operate in a difficult and very complex global multicultural environment, affected by rapid development of civilisation, technology, specialised requirements of the knowledge society, struggling with social and demographic problems (Mazurkiewicz, 2007, 2010).

Additionally, as some authors note, the state has imposed a number of requirements on schools. One of the areas, as already mentioned, covers important aspects of cooperation with the local, regional and global community (Mazurkiewicz, 2010; Kołodziejczyk, 2010). The need to cope with the tasks assigned to public schools forced them to take additional actions. One of them may be establishing relationships with various entities (Mazurkiewicz, 2011). In view of the above, there are different types of strategies in the literature. One of them is the strategy for managing relationships with stakeholders. The authors claim that a thorough and solid stakeholder analysis will allow the development of stakeholder management strategies

that, on the one hand, will strengthen relationships with friends, enable getting to know foes, potential foes and neutrals, and, on the other hand, make friends remain friends and make neutrals and some foes into friends and make foes into neutrals (Ford, Peeper, Gresock, 2009).

An interesting perspective on defining the stakeholder management strategies was presented by Mike Banks and Dusya Vera (2007). They look at the organisation as a set of contracts (agreements) between different stakeholders (resource allocators). They used two research questions to diagnose the strategy. However, they strived not only to define the strategies, but also link them with the results of the organisation. They suggested that stakeholder management strategies has to be synchronised with the organisation's strategy. During their research, they analysed all contracts (agreements) that they considered to be relationships with stakeholders, describing them in two different dimensions: exploitation and exploration. Therefore, the so-called ex ante strategies were built based on the concept of exploration and exploitation using the literature related to the learning of organisation. This strategy allows us to answer the question with which stakeholders of the organisation will enter into active relationships and how it will establish them response processes – proactive and reactive. The so-called ex post strategies are applied to already identified and active stakeholders and help improve both the material and social results of the organisation (Banks, Vera, 2007).

This approach allowed us stakeholder management strategies They are seen from the perspective of two interconnected dimensions – horizontal and vertical one. First is exploration (left) – exploitation (right) and second reactivity(down) – proactivity (up). It allows to identify four different types of strategies:

- Proactive Exploiter;
- Proactive Explorer;
- Reactive Exploiter,
- Reactive Explorer.

The horizontal dimension shows the *ex ante strategy* defined by the set of choices made by the organisation before building a relationship with the stakeholder. These choices are primarily related to a detailed identification of stakeholders in the organizational environment. They include, among others: searching for potential stakeholders of certain organization (Ford, Peeper, Gresock, 2009), forecasting the stakeholder surrounding, obtaining information about possible changes in relationships and proposing gradual changes (improvements) in existing relationships. Activities within this strategy (exploration and exploitation processes) are included in the group of learning processes (searching, collecting, processing and improving knowledge and skills), therefore they constitute the area of organisational learning of the organisation (Austen, Czakon, 2012; March, 1991).

The vertical dimension describes choices that encompass a set of processes that combine an organisation's capabilities for stakeholder integration, innovation,

and collaborative learning. This strategy applies after the relationship has been established (ex post) and can range from proactive to reactive response. Organisations establish many formal or informal relationships. This multiplicity sometimes requires organisations to use mixed strategies. When the organisation looks for new stakeholders or improves existing contracts, it implements an ex ante strategy, and when at the same time it introduces innovations and tightens cooperation (ex post), it becomes a proactive explorer. However, if, in accordance with the ex ante strategy, it conducts activities to reduce costs and maximise the value resulting from an already existing contract (ex ante), and the ex post strategy consisting in implementing this contract on the basis of consistency and compliance, it becomes a reactive exploiter. An alternative is also a combination of the proactive exploiter and reactive explorer strategies.

Proactive stakeholder management strategy defines choices related to stakeholder integration. It also involves introducing innovations and improving relationships through common learning. Proactive (ex post) organisations can predict problems before they appear and encourage stakeholders to create innovative solutions based on trust and cooperation.

Reactive stakeholder management strategy involves a set of choices consistent with law, costs, effectiveness, focused on the stakeholder and maintaining the status quo. Organisations operating according to this strategy respond to emerging problems, minimise expenditure on developing relationships, are limited to monitoring stakeholders, promote coherence of relationships and fulfil all obligations arising from concluded contracts. Researchers emphasise that the adopted ex post strategy allows the organisation to determine how it should respond to the needs (demands) of stakeholders with limited availability of resources (Austen, Czakon, 2012).

The application of the above strategies results in stakeholder management at the level of the organisation's main strategy. The use of different types of strategies depends, among others, on the characteristics of relationships with stakeholders. Organisations' striving to achieve better financial and social results causes them to become both explorers and exploiters, as well as proactive and reactive (Ford, Peeper, Gresock, 2009).

2. Methodology

Due to the specificity of the subject matter, the perspective of social constructivism was adopted, which fits into the interpretative and symbolic paradigm (Sułkowski, 2015; Sułkowski, Lenart-Gansiniec, 2021). According to it, the basis of organisation are symbolic actions, and phenomena in the organisation are shaped by participants entering into relationships (Denzin, Lincoln, 2009). Moreover, the use of qualitative research in this study was supported by the need to focus on the features

of the phenomenon, processes and meanings, not on figures (Denzin, Lincoln, 2009; Creswell, 2013). The research concentrated on the respondents perceiving and defining school relations, their entities and strategies for managing relationships with stakeholders. This approach was possible thanks to qualitative research, which allowed for examining issues in places where the respondents experienced the phenomena or problems (Creswell, 2013; Babbie, 2004). This allowed for the interpretation of the phenomenon using concepts applied by the respondents themselves (Denzin, Lincoln, 2009). In order to see the examined reality in its natural surroundings, it was necessary to visit public primary schools.

The research covered a public primary school in the city of Kraków. The school was chosen purposefully (Glinka, Czakon, 2021) and this was due to the author being familiar with it thanks to his experiences and previous research work. Knowing its specificity, it was possible to make a preliminary assessment of the cooperative relationship aspects. Additionally, the research was to examine the effects of changes in education on school management. The ways of perceiving the school's relationship with institutions and groups within the large city were explored and data on the approach to these relationships and on their management by both school management staff and teachers were obtained.

When choosing a school, it was also assumed that in the large city impulses (e.g. competition between schools for students, parents' attention, material resources) prompting management staff to enter into relationships with stakeholders will occur more quickly. The history of the school was adopted as an additional substantive criterion for selecting the subject for the research. It was assumed that the history of the school refers to "embeddedness" (Creswell, 2013). It was recognised that schools "embedded" (Polanyi, 2001) in a long history have a well-rooted image in Krakow – outstanding students, "inherited" relationships, for example with other schools, sometimes with universities such as: Jagiellonian University in Krakow, AGH University of Krakow or the Krakow University of Technology.

Building long-term relationships with various entities in the surrounding community is possible due to the developed and adopted strategy for managing these relationships. It constitutes a separate document describing all elements of the stakeholder relationship management process. It not only allows us to identify stakeholders or diagnose mutual expectations, but also enables efficient and effective action in this regard. It allows the organisation to achieve measurable benefits, both image, economic (organisational development), and social ones related to the existence of an established circle of stakeholders. A conscious and planned approach to building relationships by public primary schools will allow them, firstly, to strengthen and tighten existing bonds with stakeholders, and secondly, it will enable better use of the potential of established relationships. The analysis of these relationships will create the opportunity to select those that in the future may become the foundation to solve emerging problems in a short time and, as a consequence, may be one of the

factors for the further development of the organisation. The professional diagnosis used by the organisation will not only enable ongoing monitoring and assessment of the state and dynamics of existing relationships, but will also allow for better recognition of the surrounding, which in turn will enable the identification of new opportunities for establishing relationships.

In research on strategies for managing stakeholder relationship by public primary schools, the Banks and Vera questionnaire (Banks, Vera, 2007), modified by Aldona Frączkiewicz-Wronka, Agata Austen, and Stanisława Jung-Konstanty (Frączkiewicz-Wronka, 2012; Jung-Konstanty, 2023) was used. Moreover, the use of this questionnaire to identify stakeholder relationship management strategies in the examined educational institutions was supported by the fact that it had already been used in research into stakeholder relationship management strategies in public organisations (Frączkiewicz-Wronka, 2012; Austen, Czakon, 2012). The survey questionnaire detailed the ex ante and ex post strategies, which in turn were divided into ex ante/exploitation, ex ante/exploration, and ex post/proactive and ex post/reactive. Descriptions have been added for each type of strategy, specifying the level of implementation of a specific action on a scale from 1 to 5, with level five (5) indicating the highest level of its implementation, and level one (1) – the lowest. Respondents were asked to evaluate activities towards stakeholders in the examined organisation and mark the appropriate levels.

3. Results

Based on the responses of respondents, Table 1 illustrates the level of implementation of individual strategies in the examined entity, which is presented in numerical form. In the survey questionnaires (as mentioned above), respondents marked the level of strategy implementation on a scale from 1-5, assigning one level of their choice to individual elements of the strategy. These levels were summed for the examined school. Individual strategies were presented using a numerical indicator that is the average of the level of strategy implementation assigned to the answers to individual questions obtained from respondents for each type of indicated strategy. The numbers presented in column three indicate the level of implementation of individual strategies in the respondents' opinion. Respondents were relatively critical about estimating the level of strategies they used.

Table 1 summarises the results with regard to the examined entity. The facility concerned is one of the longest operating establishments in Krakow. The educational unit, established in 1918, is located in the old, historic district of Krakow – Podgórze. There are 193 students, 30 teachers, a pedagogue and a psychologist. The facility has a very well-developed school infrastructure, new gymnasium with full sanitary facilities, also adapted for people with disabilities, classrooms equipped with interactive

boards, very well-stocked library (4,500 volumes), fully equipped computer rooms and Wi-Fi access throughout the school. The school, as the principal points out, owes its development to good relations with parents, the local community and organisations operating in the local environment (Mazurkiewicz, 2011).

Table 1. Identification of stakeholder management strategies in a public primary school

Name of Strategy	Level of Strategy Implementation
EX ANTE/EXPLOITATION STRATEGY	4
We follow the rule of developing existing relationships	4
Our goal is to achieve good results in contacts with various stakeholders in the short term	4
We look for stakeholder relationships with a high level of assurance	4
EX ANTE/EXPLORATION STRATEGY	3.8
We actively seek new relationships with new stakeholders	3.5
Our goal is to achieve good results in contacts with various stakeholders in the long term	5
We agree to bear a certain level of risk in relationships with stakeholders	3
EX POST/PROACTIVE STRATEGY	4.4
We look for ways to solve problems that may arise in relationships with stakeholders before they arise	4
In our relationships with stakeholders, we make sure to encourage them to deepen cooperation	4.5
We are constantly looking for new areas and ways of cooperation with stakeholders	4.5
We strive to conduct an active information policy towards stakeholders and thus gain and build trust in existing relationships with stakeholders.	4.5
EX POST/REACTIVE STRATEGY	2.5
We respond to problems in stakeholder relationships only when they arise.	2
Relationships with stakeholders are incidental and shallow.	2
We consider the substance of existing relationship to be sufficient for the organisation's operation.	3
We are only focused on maintaining existing relationships, in accordance with the agreed scope of cooperation.	3

Source: own study

Moreover, research shows that the school looks for new relationships and creates conditions for building them. The principal believes that: "there is a need to create

a space for cooperation, because you can or even need to cooperate with anyone, under every circumstance and in any situation for the objectives pursued" [Principal].

According to the principal, the school establishes relationships because: "they help in organising various projects, events, in obtaining various financial resources from various institutions" [Principal].

By taking actions aimed at developing students' skills enabling proper functioning in society [school mission], the school establishes cooperation with many stakeholders. It should be emphasised that despite the great openness to building relationships, the school tries to analyse every cooperation proposal very carefully. The principal emphasises that: "It is my habit that if I receive something, I first verify it and send it on. If something interests me very much, I consider it to be good" [Principal]. The school, using the rich traditions of its 105-year history, quest for its own development based on harmonious coexistence and cooperation of all school stakeholders. It is open to cooperation initiated by teachers, students, parents and school partners [school vision].

Research proves that the school uses an ex ante exploitation strategy at level 4; and the ex post proactive strategy at level 4.4. Following the research, it may therefore be assumed that the school uses the strategy of a proactive exploiter.

Research has shown that the school does not have a strategy for cooperation with external entities in the form of a formal document. The principal believes that the school does not need one. They argue that having such a document would limit the possibilities of action in building and managing strategies. They further emphasise that the lack of such a document allows the school to both flexibly define activities in the field of establishing relationships and select entities with which the school will implement these activities. The obtained research results prove that despite the lack of such a document, the school has cooperation strategies. Research shows that the basis for school operations is the school work plan, a document containing the action plan for a given school year, reviewed by the parent board and approved by the teachers' board.

Conclusions

Research shows that the school principal is afraid to prepare a plan in the form of documents. They have very serious concerns about the risk associated with failure to implement the adopted plan. They approach it in a similar way as to the core curriculum that the school is obliged to accomplish. In view of the above, it is recommended that training programs for school management staff in the field of forming relationships with stakeholders be developed. An institutional development methodology would be especially useful, containing knowledge about how to plan school development, scale up the stages of this development, and about tools

for collecting data for development purposes. The methodology could be used to plan relationships with stakeholders, build a model desired for a given school, and determine the time limits and phases of reaching this stage. The scale of institutional development for "school relationships with stakeholders" could become a useful tool for diagnosing the quality of the relationship building process mentioned above.

It is recommended that long-term activities be planned based on conscious relationship management. One such example would be developing a plan for cooperation between the school and its stakeholders. Adopting a strategic action plan in this regard would also allow for the selection of effective relationship management strategies. The adopted plan would enable rational actions related to relationship management and would not be just the result of occasions, i.e. using any possible opportunities.

It is also recommended that the experience of foreign schools in the field of relationships with stakeholders be used. This can be done in two ways: by inviting foreign school staff to visit schools in Poland, or by sending Polish public primary school staff for internships with foreign partners. Such cooperation may be initiated by the schools themselves, especially those that already have foreign partners among their stakeholders, or by the school board or the ministry.

To summarise, it should be emphasised that, as the research has shown, the public primary school does not have any strategy for managing relationships with stakeholders *per se*. When asked about such a strategy, the interlocutors pointed to several components that, in their opinion, may reflect such a strategy. These were the following: school work plan, long-term cooperation, spontaneous activities and work teams. The results showed that the school considers managing relationships with stakeholders as an accidental and unplanned activity that results from any possible opportunities. However, actions based on relationships with stakeholders are an inherent part of the responsibility of teachers.

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