Development of the Smaller Local Communities in Slovenia Depends on the School as the Socio-Cultural Center

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Abstract

The local schools have always been the centers of the cultural and social life of the Slovenian communities. Functioning as a socio-cultural center of the local community, the school greatly surpassed its primary role of providing education to children. The process of urbanization that reached rural areas as well as the secularization of lifestyles brought about very interesting changes to the previously expanded function of local schools. In the research study we conducted in 2014 and 2015 we examined how contemporary schools perceive the need for collaboration and participation in their local environments. The results of qualitative analysis indicate that merging or closing of local schools could have negative demographic and socio-cultural consequences. Furthermore, the analysis has also revealed the underused potential of the localities lacking tradition, such as new urban areas where the school could be the crucial element in the social organization of the local community.

Keywords: local community, parents, social organization, linkages school/environment, socio-cultural center

1. Introduction

Slovenian society has been preserving a specific model of social organization, rooted in the communal form, for a long time. The local school and the church were the most important intertwining elements. Throughout history, primary school has had an important role in developing and promoting literacy (Vidmar, 2014); in Slovenia this has been combined with the (indirect) fostering of national awareness. Additionally, it has always been the center of the cultural and social life of the community. Functioning as a socio-cultural center of the local community, the school greatly surpassed its primary role of educating children.

The importance of school can also be recognized as one of the conditions enabling individuals to participate in the neighborhood and the local community, as stressed by Dekker et al. (2010, p. 610). The authors emphasize that primary school is one of the organizations that have high scores on the network indicators for individual participation (ibid., p. 628). The question is weather traditional social organization in mostly rural areas can be compared with the modern urban societies, where the forms of commutations are rapidly changing.

The process of urbanization that reached rural areas as well as the secularization of lifestyles brought about very interesting changes to the previously expanded function of local schools. As new forms of local communities emerge in modern urban society, even without being formally organized, we should follow the suggestion of D. G. Martin that researches need to be focused »on the practice of neighborhood: the social and political actions of people that define and constitute neighborhoods«. (Martin, 2003, p. 380). In addition, some traditionally rural communities in Slovenia are developing as multi-ethnic (Kovač Šebart, 2015), representing a new challenge for schools in these communities.

In the research study we conducted in 2014 and 2015 we examined how schools today perceive the need for collaboration and participation in their local environments. We found that, either weekly or monthly, 75% of schools in some way cooperate with local community organizations. At the same time schools and communities expressed the wish and the need for collaboration. Quantitative data did not show any significant difference between schools of different sizes and in different localities. These very encouraging results could be pointing to potentially unified patterns of collaboration between school and local community.

In spite of encouraging results we should take into account the fact that collaboration between schools and the community may expose various problems, obstacles and challenges that communities tackle in different ways.

Some international research studies demonstrate that in addition to objective obstacles (such as time and money), other, non-material obstacles must also be considered. Thus Canadian researchers Deslandes, Rousseau, and Royer (2002, p. 32) identified five groups of obstacles to a more intensive collaboration between schools and communities:

- a lack of time and resources;

- cultural, linguistic and educational differences;

- a lack of external support for collaboration, for instance from employers, administrative bodies and politicians;

- schools' organization that does not encourage collaboration and traditional models of school practice that restrict themselves to a limited number of families;

- insufficient qualification and a lack of information related to collaboration.

The quantitative analysis which we started with does not give a full answer to such or similar questions. Therefore, we decided for further analysis in order to obtain school educators' clearer views and opinions. With their help we acquired a more in-depth picture and, most of all, the answers to the questions about what is in the background, what actual forms and dilemmas occur in the establishment of contacts and mutual enrichment between schools and their social environments. Consequently, we decided for a qualitative approach, with the help of which we can present primary school educators' and expert practitioners' experiences and opinions and thus identify various and far from uniform practices of collaboration between schools and their social environments.

Our starting assumption was that in Slovenia there co-exist different traditions and local particularities that help to condition the relationship between schools and the environment, and the same could be claimed for other educational institutions as well, such as pre-schools (Hočevar, Kovač Šebart & Štefanc, 2013). This, however, cannot be demonstrated if we do not describe the participants' direct and daily experiences in establishing mutual ties and collaboration in schools and local communities. This assumption justified the use of the qualitative methodological approach.

2. Formulating the Problem and Key Discussion Issues in the Focus Group

To gain an insight into the developments we decided to organize a focus-group discussion. We selected this approach, because we believe that direct discussion with participants allows for the most direct insight into the views and considerations dominating Slovenian schools. We hoped this would help us to understand the situation better. Of course, we renounced the possibilities for generalization, which such an approach disables.

We planned discussion in three topic sections, namely:

Schools as the socio-cultural centers of local communities: we examined if and how the discussion participants understand the school's position in the community. But primarily we were interested in whether schools have preserved the role in traditional environments and how the role is assumed, if at all, in non-traditional, new urban and suburban environments.

Mutual expectations of schools and their social environments, including parents, teachers and organizations working in the environment, were planned as the topic of the second section. We looked into what the participants believe communities expect from schools and how they see their role in the functioning of their communities.

The third section focused on the *obstacles and problems* arising from the relationships between communities and schools. Yet, our emphasis was not on financial or time obstacles, but more on administrative obstacles, especially those stemming from people's opinions and ideas. We inquired specifically about any potential risks for schools' fundamental mission. It should not be forgotten that education is the school's first task. Nevertheless, schools do not function in isolation, but always as part, and sometimes as the heart of the local community.

The main goal, then, was to exchange experiences and to reflect upon them within each of the topic section. The aim, having finished discussions and done the analyses, was to formulate adequate suggestions and recommendation on developing further collaboration and on where changes in future development processes can be expected.

3. Research Methodology

In this part of the research study the focus-group method was used, which is a research tool that gives a "voice"

to the research participants by giving them an opportunity to define what is relevant and important to understand their experience (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 4). The participants are chosen because they are able to provide valuable contributions to the research questions. The discussion among participants provides researchers with an opportunity to hear issues which may not emerge from their interaction with researchers alone. The interaction among participants themselves leads to more emphasis being laid on the points of view of participants than those of researchers (Gaiser, 2008).

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The focus group was conducted in January 2015. We invited the educators, particularly school counselors, who participated in the conference Days of Pedagogy and Andragogy on the topic of Learning and Education in the Community (see Učenje in izobraževanje v skupnosti, 2015), which was held at that time at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. There were 16 participating educators, 6 from primary schools, one from a preschool, three from the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training, two from the Faculty of Arts, one from the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, an independent expert and two participants from other /institutions.

The participants were informed on how the focus group would develop, and the group was chaired by a member of the research team. The participants' discussions were time-limited, and the complete, two-hour debate was recorded.

The collected data were first transcribed and then analyzed through a qualitative procedure. We segmented the text into code units, and each unit was labelled with a code. When the coding was complete, we summarized the prevalence of codes and compared relationships between one or more codes. A more detailed and systematic qualitative analysis (Mesec, 1998) of the transcripts would certainly be possible, but we avoided a more meticulous dissection of the text so as to maintain the authenticity of the statements and to make full use of the focus-group method. The advantage of the latter is precisely that it allows for experts' opinions to be presented as fully as possible (Klemenčič & Hlebec, 2007).

Below we present a table (table 1) that lists pre-determined basic problem sections, followed by coded core categories and, in the third column, each core category's subcategories. The participants in the focus group were ascribed numbers from 1 to 16, and the numbers are given when quoting them. In the presentation we focus on the three problem sections (school as a social and cultural center of the community, participants' expectations regarding collaboration between school and the community, and the obstacles encountered during the collaboration) and we emphasize only the aspects that are important to understand the significance of schools for the functioning of the community.

Table 1. Problem section, core categories of the section, subcategories

Problem section	*Core categories of the section*	*Subcategories*
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CENTER OF THE COMMUNITY	SMALL COMMUNITY	**big and small schools** **branch schools** **cultural events**
	INTELLECTUAL CENTER	**suburban traditional environment** **awareness**
	LOCAL IDENTITY	**professional life** **personal contacts** **sense of belonging**
EXPECTATIONS	PARENTS	
	ORGANIZATIONS	
OBSTACLES	BUREAUCRATIC AND POLITICAL	
	MENTALITY	
	DANGERS	

4. Presentation of Results

Urbanization may have changed the classical structure of the village with a school, a church, a fire station and a restaurant, but the question remains if primary schools still exert any influence on the community, still affect the formation and functioning of the local community and its social structuring.

The debate in the focus group showed that actual practices regarding collaboration between the community and schools are very diverse. In fact, a great diversity of opinion raises the question about the concept, about the understanding of the process of collaboration. That is why a more detailed analysis of the various forms, contacts, mutual expectations and activities is required.

4.1 School as the Social and Cultural Center of the Community

In accordance with our initial finding – that situations differ significantly – we first paid attention to the part of the discussion that illustrates the differences the participants ascribed to the size of the community. We expected differences regarding schools' functions as social and cultural centers of the community to occur primarily between big and small communities. And, indeed, we got the expected response to the question about how schools fulfil the function of the cultural and social center:

I believe that schools, especially non-urban schools, still often are the center; but as you said at the start, I think that urban schools, I'm talking about primary schools, are no longer, having forgotten about this part, but they needn't have or they could return back to it. (10)

Needless to say, not all the inhabitants of a community are equally notable participants in the collaboration. We usually give priority to children's parents and their close relatives, but a participant in the focus group thought this was not necessarily true, especially in small communities:

Yes, grandmothers, grandfathers are more connected, yes. But we have elderly inhabitants who are also invited and elections and such like. They are invited, but of course they also network a bit, so some do come, but not many. Mostly it is, obviously, parents or relatives. But it's hard to define. It's a small place and then it is loads of them. Suburbia, but they still rely on the school pretty much, but it's also true it's very much related to children, yes. (3)

4.2 Big and Small Schools

Our quantitative empirical analysis showed no significant differences between big and small schools regarding their collaboration with the social environment, at least as far as the scope, content and expectations are concerned. But when we addressed the issue of school sizes and collaboration with the local community during the focus group, it became obvious that there are differences in specific situations, although they cannot be registered by a general questionnaire.

The following consideration draws attention to the differences between small and big schools:

Big schools have fewer contacts ..., a big system works differently from a smaller system and, actually, it is logical it also needs fewer of them, it has other advantages from the viewpoint of resources, efficiency; we know that massive should mean efficient, but our cultural environment has never been massive and so this criterion brings troubles. (4)

Although it is not always and necessarily true but, as a rule, small schools are situated in small communities; in urban areas schools are generally bigger. It means that school sizes and environments together create social contexts; here, we would like to lay special emphasis on branch schools.

4.3 Branch Schools

To understand the significance of branch schools in Slovenia, let us consider some data. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, there were 328 branch schools in 2014 (Osnovnošolsko izobraževanje, 2015) whereas the Education, Science and Culture Trade Union of Slovenia notes that four years previously there had been 349. Jelen states that "branch schools account for 46% of primary schools in Slovenia, but they include only 2.45% of students. They predominantly have four grades. They are typified by combined, multi-grade classes". (Jelen, 2010, p. 56) Bearing these figures in mind, it may seem understandable that in their 2011 report (Priporočila OECD ..., 2011) the OECD recommend that Slovenia should close down smaller, especially branch schools (see also Smrt podružnicam, živelo šolstvo, 2011). And at first it may be argued that economic reasons and financial efficiency do not justify the great expenses that such schools incur.

The data and the ever-present dilemmas about the *raison d'être* of branch schools stimulated the participants in the focus group to spend some more time on debating the issue, although that was not originally planned. The participants' views were surprisingly unanimous, presenting branch schools in a completely new role which

should be taken into consideration when making economic analyses and reflecting upon the existing network of schools in Slovenia. They, namely, have direct implications for the significance of schools in the local community.

The first participant drew attention to the importance of branch schools to tackling the decrease in the population, that is, the shift in depopulation trends in some smaller places:

It [closing down branch schools] *may have been a trend three decades ago, but today they're moving back because of cheaper rents, real estates – that is to the places where they once used to be, where the basic infrastructure is. I wanted to stress the radicalism, there is certain radicalism in what schools mean for the community and for whether today the community survives or doesn't survive. (1)*

Attempts at maintaining branch schools often unite local inhabitants, principals and local community leaders who are aware of the importance of the school to the community and its identity.

Principals of schools with more branch schools, perhaps a mayor here or there, who did everything to keep branch schools at the edges of their school districts or municipalities today see that their efforts have paid off; they were aware of the key role of schools as social and cultural centers. They knew that a place or a hamlet or a hill would die out without a school. (1)

Branch schools also offer space for social and cultural life in less secluded areas, a life which would not exist without them. The next participant highlighted the importance of branch schools in suburban environments without tradition or a classical village structure:

We have a branch school, a suburban school in an environment without a cultural home from the times when they liked building them so much, big halls, so that the school is used for cultural events, too. So I think our school works on collaboration with the local community, with these cultural events ..., but I wanted to emphasize that this is a space where local people come, because they have no other, and the school is meant for it, as well. (3)

Although branch schools may have weaknesses, we can conclude that the participants believe they can, as a rule, contribute to the opening and widening of the community, depending of course on the teachers and schools' atmosphere. Children with special needs are also expected to feel homier in small branch schools, but they must, certainly, be provided with adequate treatment and professional assistance. Thus, we agree with the participant saying that

branch schools already perform the role of, say, a sort of social, cultural and other centers (1),

but it is important to emphasize that due to a smaller number of educators and, especially, support services in such schools, care for quality and adequate expertise is particularly important. Therefore, these should be given special attention.

4.4 Expectations – What Does the Community Expect from Schools?

The relationship dynamics between schools and communities rests upon objective circumstances described and commented on by the participants in the focus group. In addition to objective circumstances, there are always the dimensions of expectations and relationships which are partly or wholly subjective in nature. This is obvious from our analysis so far, but it was also given special focus during our focus-group discussion.

4.4.1 Parents' Expectations

Parents' expectations from the school are often ambivalent. On the one hand, they expect that the school's program will offer a lot of knowledge and enable the child's optimum development. On the other hand, they look for opportunities to include children in the activities provided by the local community, not directly related to the school.

This dilemma opens up a space for collaboration and enrichment, and calls for new considerations. Schools can react indifferently to parents' expectations, but they can also be a factor and promoter in children's participation in extracurricular activities (Kalin & Šteh, 2010), thus allowing parents the opportunities for their children's development with the help and support from schools:

We're trying, we're not always successful, we're criticized for wrong decisions, when judged by what some people expect, we also often distribute evaluation questionnaires ... I didn't take time for it for many years, but now I do, and I'm very sad when there's no feedback, I prefer criticism saying it was bad, it was not good, so that I can start to think about it, improve it and do something about it. A lot can be done. (2)

This, then, is the question about whether schools should initiate children's participation in extra activities and then monitor and lead it, whether they should be the motor of development outside of their mandatory programs,

too. Interestingly, a focus-group participant noted that parents always expect positive effects of schools in the community:

But people, whether they are aware of it or not, expect that there will be some effect, that there will be some development, that the community will progress. Not that children will be educated and then leave. These are tough responses and great expectations. (4)

These effects are not self-evident, especially not if parents are not attracted by schools and if they cannot – or do not strive to – offer opportunities and help in their children's development. Parents' collaboration thus becomes crucial, parents are the means through which schools open into the community and create for themselves either a central or marginal role.

It could be argued that parents' expectations are the consequence and result of schools' conscious orientation outward. The parents who are interested in children's development and better opportunities for them to participate in school-organized activities will respond if they get positive feedback that confirms their initial expectations. In the long term it means that even when their children leave compulsory education in the school, they will expect – as the quote above demonstrates – that the school will help the community to progress and attract young people after they have left school as well as before.

4.4.2 Organizations' Expectations

Expectations of organizations in different school environments are very different. Renting out rooms, especially classrooms and gyms to local societies and adult education organizations for recreational, educational and sport purposes is, of course, the most widespread. The infrastructure that schools have is crucial for small communities to have such activities at all. Such instances, especially if the only interest is financial, can hardly be described as collaboration, as they are predominantly formalized relationships. However, we should not overlook informal meetings of the users with the school's educators and students who spend time in the school's vicinity after classes, especially in the outdoor playgrounds and school courtyards. Especially in smaller communities, where social cohesion is stronger, such informal contacts have greater significance to the development of informal groups and communication that integrates school space and, consequently, school as a whole into the local environment.

The possibilities that schools have, even if only infrastructure is concerned, are much greater than merely renting out spaces for recreation. Schools possess larger infrastructure which they can, or not, offer for various activities:

Schools have infrastructure, they have space which is more or less empty in the afternoons. Perhaps it would be very interesting to carry out a pilot project to use this school space for counseling centers to come to schools or for non-government experts from the wider community to provide various activities and so do something for children's and families' education and upbringing. It means that such contents would be realized in schools and adjusted to the needs of the local environment. (7)

Based on the focus-group debate regarding mutual expectations of schools, parents and organizations in the community we conclude that it is a circular process. Expectations rise as a consequence of positive experiences that individual agents of collaboration gain. What is important is initiative, sometimes perseverance, and the recognition of the situations that can be developed, reaching a new quality. Parents in particular are a kind of bridge between schools and their social environments, so it is very important for educators to have someone to turn to; the latter can open up the space, raise expectations and adequately motivate for further content cooperation.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we present only those conclusions from the focus group that we find relevant to schools' influence on the functioning of the wider community. It seems there can be no universal model of collaboration between schools and communities. It is important to distinguish between schools in urban, suburban and village environments, and frequent emphasis in this text is also laid on schools' cultural and intellectual functions in smaller communities. It is particularly important to note branch schools. Although they include fewer children, they are of key importance from the aspects of demographic development, the life of smaller communities (Kump & Jelenc Krašovec, 2014) and the preservation of the traditional structure of the Slovenian social landscape. Our findings also reveal that schools in small traditional communities play a significant role in strengthening the social capital and participation in social and cultural life. In comparison to the findings of some other studies (see Dekker, 2007, p. 369), our research shows that small communities with branch schools engage the participation not only of the parents, but of other community members as well.

Schools have many opportunities to take on a more active role as the cultural and social center of the community.

In this, the parents of students are the group that is crucial to collaboration, mutual enrichment and, finally, the social and cultural integration and profile of the local community. The community's collaboration with schools is important for the preservation of the community's local identity, but the reverse is also true: the community gives schools identity.

In this respect, the participants in the focus group emphasized the problems that could occur if such an identity meant imposing limits on the wider social and cultural environment into which and for which schools should socialize their students.

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