

Teachers Attitudes Towards Certain Aspects of Managing Educational Change in Lithuania

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ABSTRACT

A survey has been conducted of teachers attitudes towards managing educational change in Lithuania. 117 responses to an opinion questionnaire were received. The survey was intended to examine teachers attitudes towards education policy of the country, evaluation of the ongoing educational reform, position towards power distribution between the Ministry of Education and Science, local educational authorities, and headteachers. The survey also explored attitudes towards teacher training and appraisal. Findings indicate that teacher attitudes towards educational reform and devolution of power are mostly neutral. Strictly negative attitude was expressed towards the way the Parliament and the Government are solving educational problems. A strong belief that society and non-governmental organisations should play bigger role in Lithuanian education was expressed.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1990, when Lithuania regained its independence and educational reform was started, there have been substantial changes in the educational system of the country. Though overwhelming majority of the population welcomed the breakdown of the communist regime, attitudes towards changes in education were and still remain rather controversial. Teaching community has differing views concerning further development of educational structures. The variety of outlooks could be roughly divided into two major trends: one aiming towards reestablishing the pre-Soviet educational structure which existed in

Lithuania before the occupation in 1940, and another – towards absorbing present foreign experience and borrowing ready-made educational models from the developed countries of Western Europe. These trends – „return to the roots“ and „borrowing from abroad“ – became the two main currents of educational thought not only in Lithuania, but also in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Anweiler, 1992). Another trait of educational reforms in most of post-communist countries was that they emerged not as a result of any kind of empirical analysis, but as a reaction to the totalitarian past (Anweiler, 1992). The need to make it differently than it was made during the Soviet times was stronger than need for careful consideration of possible consequences of change in educational structures. For example, educational reformers regarded the structure of unified system of comprehensive compulsory education as negative consequence of the former Soviet model and started removing it, not taking into consideration that during the past decades most countries in Western Europe have reorganized their school systems along comprehensive lines. To some extent it was inevitable, as time was pressing hard and new system of education had to be put into operation as quickly as possible. However, that kind of „desovietisation“ led to hasty decisions, spontaneous improvisations, and frequent amendments and re-adjustments of newly adopted laws and regulations.

Critics of the educational reform claim that until the present moment educational policy of the country is not clearly defined, and major political parties have not expressed their positions towards the most important aspects of educational change. In other words, lack of effective management on highest levels of educational structures is pointed out (Pukelis, 1995).

On the other hand, the official outlook states that new system of education, which underwent further developments in the course of last several years, has been finally established and put into action (Ministry of Culture and Education, 1994). It still maintains a considerable level of centralization, and is considered as centralized system of education by international experts (Council for Cultural Co-operation, 1994),

though at the same time a substantial shift towards decentralization is evident, when the new system is compared with the old Soviet one. It would be an oversimplification to claim that the process of decentralization is always positive, and, on the other hand, centralization is negative. Deeper analysis of educational change shows that neither one-sided centralization nor decentralization works (Fullan, 1993). Each nation in terms of its particular circumstances has to achieve an appropriate and viable balance between centralizing tendencies intended to safeguard national objectives and the legitimate, devolutionary and participative aspirations on local level (Hughes, 1990). No wonder that internationally there have been shifts in all directions, with some systems centralizing, some decentralizing, some doing both and some doing neither (Davies, 1990). The question, whether Lithuania has already achieved an appropriate balance of power in this continuum of centralization–decentralization, is still to be answered.

Educational change is closely interrelated with issues of teacher training, both on pre-service and in-service levels. For educational reform to be implemented successfully, teachers should be trained to accept new situation and to work effectively within changing educational environment. The development of teachers knowledge base for change is a powerful potential asset for implementation of educational reform. Fullan (1993) claims that the problem of productive change simply cannot be addressed unless continuous teacher education – pre-service and in-service – is treated as the major vehicle for producing teachers as change agents. He suggests that at the present moment initial preparation of teachers is the weakest, though potentially the strongest link in educational reform. The process of teacher appraisal might also give a strong impetus towards development of skills necessary for successful dealing with change. On the other hand, appraisal scheme, if it is not effectively designed and administered, can initiate negative attitude of teachers towards appraisal in particular, and educational innovations in general.

The aim of the present study was to explore the attitudes of the main actors of the educational process – the teachers – towards certain

aspects of educational change, mentioned above. Attitudes are considered to be particularly useful indicators in the domain of education. Attitudes, values and opinions are in fact a major element of how the education system actually works (OECD, 1995). Our research was based on the premise that teachers attitudes might provide a greater insight into the processes that are taking place in Lithuanian education.

Description of the research and the process of data collection

A questionnaire containing 16 questions was designed, covering certain important areas of educational change:

- educational policy,
- educational reform,
- distribution of power between different levels of education,
- teacher training and appraisal.

The questionnaire was administered during April–May 1995 with teachers of primary and secondary schools who took part in teacher appraisal activities in the region of Molėtai. Molėtai is one of the 44 administrative regions of Lithuania with a total number of 518 teachers working in schools of all types. We distributed the questionnaire and received responses from 117 teachers, which makes 22,5% of the total number of teachers in the region. Before conducting the main survey the questionnaire was piloted with a small number of respondents. The method used during the pilot study was one of personal interviews and consisted of asking the respondents the questions on the printed questionnaire and then following these with more probing questions to check the validity of the items. Descriptive statistics were used for the analysis of the data.

Results of the research

Below we present the questions from the questionnaire, the scores and a short analysis of them.

Educational policy

Can you say that Lithuania has a clear educational policy?

Yes	6 (5,1%)
Partly	79 (67,5%)
No	31 (26,5%)
Did not answer	1 (0,9%)

More than two-thirds of the respondents think that at least partially Lithuania has solved the problem of defining its educational policy. On the other hand, only five percents of respondents claimed that to them educational policy of the country seems to be clearly defined. The results make us presume that educational policy in Lithuania is still not sufficiently shaped and needs more of clarification and promotion.

Are you familiar with educational programmes of major Lithuanian political parties?

Yes	5 (4,3%)
Partly	66 (56,4%)
No	44 (37,6%)
Did not answer	2 (1,7%)

More than half of the respondents are to some extent acquainted with educational programmes of the political parties. However, only a small number of them (just above 4%) think that they are really familiar with the programmes. The result might be influenced by general disinterest of Lithuanian people, and teachers in particular, in recent activities of Lithuanian political parties. On the other hand, we tend to conclude that major political forces of the country still put too little efforts into explaining their views on educational development to the teaching community.

When compared with Soviet times, situation in Lithuanian education is:

Better	37 (31,6%)
The same	27 (23,1%)
Worse	48 (41%)
Did not answer	5 (4,3%)

We can see no clear tendency expressed in the answers of the respondents, though relatively larger number of respondents think that situation got worse. We assume that the results reflect general contro-

versy in Lithuanian teaching community concerning evaluation of recent developments in education. It might be worthwhile to mention that while conducting the interviews we got the impression that here evaluations were made mostly in terms of financing and resource availability, and not in terms of freedom of expression or curriculum development.

Are you satisfied with the way the Parliament and the Government solve educational problems?

Yes	0
Partly	10 (8,5%)
No	107 (91,5%)

Here we can observe a very vivid expression of major dissatisfaction of teachers with an attitude of high rank politicians towards education and its problems. During personal interviews we got the impression that in fact all our respondents think that resource allocated for education are too small, and teachers salaries are too low.

Are you satisfied with the work of the Ministry of Education and Science?

Yes	5 (4,3%)
Partly	72 (61,5%)
No	39 (33,3%)
Did not answer	1 (0,9%)

Evaluation of the work of the Ministry is much more favourable than that of the Parliament and the Government. We might consider it as an appreciation of the way educational professionals are dealing with educational problems on the Ministry level vs. politicians on Parliamentary and Governmental levels. However, an overall evaluation is not very optimistic. A small number of respondents (above 4%) feel completely satisfied with the work the Ministry does, while two-thirds of respondents are definitely unsatisfied.

Educational reform

What is your evaluation of ongoing educational reform?

Positive	25 (21,4%)
Neutral	80 (51,3%)
Negative	30 (25,6%)
Did not answer	2 (1,7%)

More than one half of the respondents tend to take a neutral stand towards educational reform. Almost similar number of respondents are either in favour or against the way the reform is being carried out. Here again we see the reflection of existing contradictory position taken by teachers in Lithuania towards ongoing changes in education.

The pace of the reform is:

Too quick	17 (14,5%)
Normal	35 (29,9%)
Too slow	60 (51,3%)
Did not answer	5 (4,3%)

Majority of respondents think that the pace of the reform is too slow. We assume that educational community was awaiting the faster, more effective, and more visible changes which could prove the rightness of the direction taken by educational reformers.

The aims of the reform are:

Too broad	51 (43,5%)
Adequate	60 (51,3%)
Too narrow	3 (2,6%)
Did not answer	3 (2,6%)

Though half of the respondents consider the aims of the reform to be adequate, a substantial number of teachers who participated in our survey think that they are too broad. Answers to this, as well as to the previous question make us think that more specific and thus faster educational changes might have been more favourably accepted by Lithuanian teachers.

Distribution of power between different levels of education

Lithuanian educational system should be:

More centralized	34 (29%)
The same as now	23 (19,7%)
Less centralized	57 (48,7%)
Did not answer	3 (2,6%)

Almost one half of the respondents think that Lithuanian educational system should be less centralized. On the other hand, quite a substantial number of investigatives – almost every third – prefer a more centralized

system. Differentiation of opinions is evident. We assume that the results reflect the existing controversy concerning level of centralization of education and possible merits or shortcomings of devolution of power.

Do you think that the power of the Ministry of Education and Science is:

Too big	23 (19,7%)
Adequate	59 (50,4%)
Too small	31 (26,5%)
Did not answer	4 (3,4%)

One half of the teachers who participated in our survey evaluated the power allocated to the Ministry as adequate. Differences in proportion of investigatives who think that the power of the Ministry is too big and of thinking that the power is too small are not essential. Our conclusion is that despite differences in opinions the present level of power held by the Ministry is ballanced and acceptable to the majority of teachers.

Do you think that the power of local educational authority is:

Too big	14 (12%)
Adequate	85 (72,6%)
Too small	17 (14,5%)
Did not answer	1 (0,9%)

Almost three out of four respondents evaluate the power allocated to local educational authority as adequate. It is interesting to note that it is a middle, or regional level which is evaluated as most ballanced and adequate. Quite often the middle level is considered to be a trouble causing level in terms of power distribution: actors of the educational process claim that it has either too much or too little power in the national systems of education (British educational reform is one possible illustration of this problem).

Do you think that the power of headteacher is:

Too big	17 (14,5%)
Adequate	69 (59%)
Too small	30 (25,6%)
Did not answer	1 (0,9%)

More than one half of our investigatives think that the power of headteacher is adequate. If we consider the numbers of the respondents

who would like the ballance of power to be changed, we see that the bigger number – about one-fourth – would prefer to increase the power of headteacher. The number of teachers who would like to diminish the power of headteacher is smaller, and we think that it is a sign showing that Lithuanian headteachers on the whole are using their power adequately and the teaching staff supports their ways of exercising power.

Do you think that society and non-governmental organisations should play in education:

Bigger role	92 (78,7%)
The same as now	10 (8,5%)
Smaller role	13 (11,1%)
Did not answer	2 (1,7%)

Significant majority of respondents are inclined to think that society and non-governmental organisations should play a bigger role in education. From this as well as from previous answers we may conclude that teachers who participated in our survey would prefer to see the process of further decentralization developing in this particular direction. Further research should help to answer the question which specific actors – school councils, professional teachers organisations, non-governmental educational funds, etc. – should gain more power in solving educational problems. Anyway, the results show that our investigatives are looking positively towards attracting the widest possible array of societal institutions into the process of further educational development.

Teacher training and appraisal

Are you satisfied with the level of professional preparedness of young teachers, who are just starting to work in your schools?

Yes	35 (29,9%)
Partly	67 (57,3%)
No	12 (10,2%)
Did not answer	3 (2,6%)

We can see that most of our respondents are fully or partly satisfied with professional preparedness of young teachers. The results may provide further suport to opinion, which says that present level of pre-service

training meets the needs of schools and of teachers who are working there. On the other hand, need for further improvement in this sphere is not denied.

Are you satisfied with existing opportunities of in-service training?

Yes	31 (26,5%)
Partly	60 (51,3%)
No	26 (22,2%)

Majority of the investigatives are fully or partly or satisfied with opportunities of in-service training which are provided for them. We may conclude that on the whole situation with in-service training seems to be more or less satisfactory, though evaluations of pre-service were higher.

Are you satisfied with the existing system of teacher appraisal?

Yes	17 (14,5%)
Partly	56 (47,9%)
No	44 (37,6%)

Almost one half of the respondents are partly satisfied, but more than one-third expressed clear negative attitude towards the existing system of teacher appraisal. The number of teachers who seem to be happy with appraisal is relatively small. We think that this is a worrying sign, which points to possible reconsideration of the efficiency and the attractiveness of the teacher appraisal scheme.

Conclusions

Answers to the questions presented in the questionnaire show that the teachers who participated in our survey would like to see clearer expression of the educational policy of the country. They would like to be better informed about the educational programmes of major Lithuanian political parties. While comparing the present situation with the Soviet times, the opinions differed, but those who saw the present situation as being worse, most probably evaluated it in terms of financing and resource availability. The survey revealed major dissatisfaction of our respondents with the way the Parliament and the Government solve educational problems. Evaluation of the work done by the Ministry in this sense is more favourable.

Majority of respondents tend to take a neutral position towards ongoing educational reform. Most of the teachers who participated in the survey think that the pace of the reform is too slow. Though majority of respondents consider the aims of the reform to be adequate, quite a substantial number of them think that aims are too broad. This led us to the conclusion that more specific and thus faster educational changes might have been more favourably accepted by Lithuanian teachers.

Half of the respondents preferred a less centralized system of education, when compared with the present one. As most of our investigators evaluated the power allocated to the Ministry, local educational authorities and headteachers as adequate, we came to the conclusion that they see the process of further decentralization primarily through empowering societal and non-governmental structures. Further research in this field might help us to answer the question which specific actors – school councils, professional organisations of teachers, non-governmental educational funds, etc. – should gain more power.

The survey showed that majority of the investigators are fully or partially satisfied with pre-service and in-service training provided for Lithuanian teachers. Though while evaluating the existing system of teacher appraisal opinions divided, a substantial number of respondents expressed clear dissatisfaction. We consider this result of the survey as a worrying sign, pointing out the possibility of reconsideration of the efficiency and attractiveness of the present system of appraisal.

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Rimantas Želvys

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