

The Non-public Stakeholders' Participation in the Implementation of Educational Tasks as a Form of Education Policy Rationalization. The Case of Local Education Policy in Poland¹

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Abstract

The article focuses on the implementation of educational tasks in rural and urban-rural municipalities in Poland. For several years education policy has been one of the key problems of the Polish municipalities due to constantly growing costs of educational tasks. This problem particularly affects small municipalities in which education absorbs most of their budgets and which limits development opportunities of municipalities in other fields. The article presents one of possible forms of local education policy rationalization, which is the transfer of educational tasks to non-public stakeholders, with particular emphasis on social organizations. In the article, the author analyzes the most engaging form of stakeholders' participation in education policy, which is recognized as an example of co-production of public services. Thus, the concept of co-production constitutes the theoretical framework of the article.

Keywords: policy, participation, co-production, public governance, education policy, non-public stakeholders.

Introduction

The issue of non-public stakeholders' participation in the implementation of education tasks is undertaken along with any reform of education policy and planned changes in the school governance system. Non-public stakeholders' participation in education policy is identified with the processes of decentralization and democratization of the school as a whole. In practice, however, it is generally limited to the presence of collegiate social bodies in the school government processes and the impact of the

school environment (stakeholders) on the model of a student's education and upbringing. The process of non-public actors' participation in education system rarely affects the entirety of education policy, starting from the conceptual and decision-making stage, through the school governance process, and finishing at the stage of educational tasks implementation.

This article focuses on non-public stakeholders' participation, strongly involving non-state actors in public sphere activities, including the implementation of educational tasks. In this sense, participation is understood as a form of co-production of educational services, rather than participation understood as social bodies (such as partners' councils, school councils) engagement in the functioning of schools (not requiring a high level of commitment).

Based on the preliminary results of the conducted research, the analysis of normative acts, sources and reports on education, the author focuses on the issue of participation of extra-public (non-public) entities – mostly associations – in the implementation of education policy. The article aims to describe and explain on the basis of identified cases the situations (circumstances) in which stakeholders' participation (i.e. taking over a school by a non-public entity/NGOs) has become a part of the process of rationalizing the municipal education policy. The hypothesis put forward by the author assumes that the actual participation of non-state actors manifests itself in full engagement in public tasks, involving expenditure (financial, labour), personal commitment, and responsibility. In this sense, participation can be considered a form

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of co-production. The theoretical framework of this article is set out by the concept of co-production.

The article presents the preliminary results of research conducted in selected (targeted) rural and urban-rural municipalities in Poland. Based on the analysis of statistical data concerning the rationalization of the school network in Polish municipalities in the years 2006–2014, the author selected the municipality for qualitative research in two stages. In the first stage, the provinces (Polish: województwa/voivodships/provinces) were selected where in the indicated period the most, medium and the least number of schools have been liquidated². Three selected provinces are differentiated in terms of the school network as well as social and economic conditions. In the second stage – within the provinces – the municipalities were selected. The school liquidation process affected in particular rural and urban-rural municipalities due to demographic decline and rising costs of educational tasks. In some cases, the education policy consumed most of the municipal budgets, limiting development opportunities. The paper presents the results of qualitative research, conducted using semi-structured interviews scenarios. In total, there were 60 interviews conducted among the respondents representing the following groups of local communities: local authorities (the executive body and representatives of the constituent body), local administration officials dealing with educational policy (section of education policy), local community representatives related to the local school (including students' parents, village leaders, local activists), school directors and teachers of local schools at risk of liquidation as well as representatives of non-public organizations that have undertaken to run local schools. Based on the conclusions of interviews, the author formulated three models of transferring schools to non-public entities, that will be developed in the following part of the paper.

Theoretical framework of the research ***Decentralization of education policy in Poland – a noble purpose, but seeming character***

The changes that have been taking place in the education policy system in Poland in recent years only seemingly democratize the education system. In spite of the implementation of further solutions enabling the inclusion of social entities in the impact on education, the relics of centralized order still

² School closure is one of the forms of the process of educational policy rationalization at the local level. From the point of view of the authorities and the local community, this is the most radical solution, most likely to cause social resistance and carries the risk of losing social support for the current local government.

remain intact. As Sześciło describes it, in the case of decentralization of education, in Poland we have to deal with actions that can be described as “two steps forward, one backward”. On the one hand, central government takes measures to decentralize and increase the freedom of local authorities to implement education policies and to socialize schools by introducing institutional arrangements such as parents' councils, school councils and educational councils (Sześciło, 2016, p. 33). On the other hand, there is a strong dependence of the school system and the shape of the school network on the decisions of the supervisory authorities, which preclude the rational development and implementation of education policy, and therefore, because of the high costs of education policy, even paralyze actions within other public policies.

Subsequent changes in education policy implemented over recent years have been addressed by decentralizing and increasing the impact on the governance system and the nature of the school (including on education and learning issues) by social actors, i.e. teachers, parents, and students. As pointed out by Waligórski (Waligórski, 1997, pp. 265–266), the issue of non-public actors' participation in education policy has to be considered in two dimensions, namely internal and external. The internal dimension includes activities designed to develop internal regulatory solutions that allow effective school management, including things such as how to make decisions, consult changes and communicate with stakeholders. The aim of process should be to optimize the efficiency and effectiveness of schools, aiming at the further development of current activity (Waligórski, 1997, p. 267).

Whereas, in case of external participation, the impact of the school (and learning outcomes) on local development processes, the impact on the local community, and the whole environment are equally important. It is worth pointing out, however, that stakeholders' participation should be bi-directional. It is not just about “school's impact” on the environment, but rather about collaborating with the school environment and networking. According to Waligórski, stakeholders' participation in this dimension is intended to prevent the creation of a distance between the school and the local community. It should provide conditions for participation in the public sphere, and also to act as a preventive factor against centralization of education. Such socialization can be identified with “self-government”, understood as involving the local community in public activities (Waligórski, 1997, p. 267; Kwiatkowski, 2008).

Referring to the external dimension of stakeholders' participation in education policy, one

can point out that the existing legal and institutional solutions in Poland allow the actual participation of non-public actors in the implementation of education policy. The first of the existing solutions is the possibility of creating educational councils, which are optional advisory bodies (opinion-making, initiative) of municipal authorities (Art. 48 of the Education System Act). Although the idea of establishing educational councils as social advisory bodies that may influence the processes of creating education policy in municipalities seemed right, the way in which these entities were authorized has in practice been rare and devoid of any major influence on municipal education policy (Gozdowska and Uryga, 2015, p. 8).

The second option for schools is to be managed by non-state actors³, and thus participate in the public service delivery process. In this sense, stakeholders' participation is close to co-production, understood as voluntary involvement of people in the process of providing services, aimed at improving their accessibility and quality (Sześciło, 2015, pp. 76–88). Inclusion of non-state actors into the public service delivery system involves long-term commitment, responsibility and risk, as well as the need to cooperate with the public sector. This full (actual) form of stakeholders' participation is especially visible in Poland for small schools (up to 70 students). Financial and organizational problems related to their maintenance have in many cases mobilized the school environment to actively engage in the process of implementing educational tasks and taking over from local governments. This form of socialization will be the subject of further considerations of this text.

From non-public actors' participation to co-production of public services

The solution to transfer a small school to a non-public is an example of a co-production of public services. The co-production is not about engaging individuals in the activities of advisory and consultative bodies, but about their actual contribution to the creation of a public service. The co-production is not a new solution, but in Poland is still unpopular and is merely recognized as a form of cooperation between public administration and

³ It is important to distinguish between non-state actors running non-public and non-state actors that manage schools under the rights applicable to public schools, which undertake such tasks themselves or have been delegated to do so under Art. 5g of the Education System Act (refers to the so-called small schools up to 70 pupils). In this article, the author focuses exclusively on the second solution, i.e. the situation where schools maintain their public status and the authority is transferred from a local government unit to a non-public entities.

non-public entities. However, in recent years, this concept has been increasingly analyzed in the context of education, welfare, and health care services (see: Sześciło, 2014, 2015, 2016; Ciepielewska-Kowalik, 2016; Kaźmierczak, 2014; Podgórnjak-Krzykacz, 2015). Meanwhile, this approach has been widely described in literature, especially in the United States and Western European countries, where it was analyzed within a variety of theoretical frameworks, such as public administration and management theory or service management theory (see: Levine and Fisher, 1984; Alford, 1998; Pestoff, 2006; Osborne and Strokosch, 2013; Osborne, Radnor and Strokosch, 2016). In addition, co-production of public services has also been implicated in the context of local community activity and the change in the relationship between public administration and service recipients, that in the process of co-production become jointly responsible for accomplishing tasks (Löffler, 2009; Bovaird and Löffler, 2012; Steen, 2015).

This approach requires preparation of local communities to participate in the public sphere and their active involvement in the provision of public services. The co-production idea also requires both intellectual and social capital and undertaking activities that integrate local community and prevent from social disparities (Sześciło 2015, p. 18; Bovaird, 2007). The co-production also demands a change of local community attitude, its activity in public life as well as willingness to cooperate (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012). The requirement of active participation in the public sphere seems particularly difficult to achieve in the case of Polish society, which is characterized by claims towards public authorities and low level of trust concerning public sector (CBOS, 2016; cf. OECD, 2016, pp. 126–128). The majority of the Polish society is still rooted in the previous system without seeing the need to voluntarily engage in public activities. They remain attached to the model of the welfare state, and not as Rodger pointed out, to the welfare society concept (Rodger, 2000).

The co-production model creates new relationships (partnership) between the involved parties, diametrically opposite to the traditional model of public administration (Ostrom, 1978; Meijer, 2012). In the traditional model, the public sector was the only provider of public services, which supplied services through the specialized public institutions (Schilder, 2000). The public sector's hermitage and its monopoly – in case of providing some services – largely determined its dominance and advantage over other sectors. The lack of competition, however, caused that the efficiency, economic rationality of

provisioning services as well as their quality were not a priority in the traditional model.

Taking into account the above mentioned factors of the co-production process, it can be claimed that running a school (especially small/local schools) in Poland by non-state actors is a form of co-production of educational services, which according to the law in force are a public task. Taking over of schools from local governments (agreement based on the Article 5g of the Education System Act) or through an informal agreement with the local community was voluntary. The main goal was common for both local authorities and the local community and involved the provision of educational services. Simultaneously, both sides had particular and independent goals. In the case of local authorities, this was a limitation of educational expenditures (related to the maintenance of buildings, teachers' salaries and other school-related costs). In the case of the local community (and non-public entities), it was important to maintain a local school as an educational institution which, besides educational functions, also fulfilled other functions such as integration, cultural as well as attested the prestige of the village. Running a school by non-state actors also involved, as in the case of co-production of public tasks in general, the cost to the local community and responsibility for the task being carried out. Maintaining a small rural school, often in the Polish context involved parents' investment in the renovation and organizational work, financial contribution for the most urgent expenses of a school or participation in acquiring additional financial support for school needs (interview: M/II/DS/N/ST1).

Managing schools by non-state actors – formal conditions

The current Polish legal regulations provide the possibility of running schools by non-public bodies. Kurzyna-Chmiel points out that the involvement of NGOs in the processes of implementing public tasks is precisely the socialization of administration. These processes, in turn, lead to the privatization of public tasks, which manifests itself in the change of the direct contractor of public tasks (and/or the provider of public services) from public to non-public. These actions demonstrate the decentralization of public administration (Kurzyna-Chmiel, 2013, p. 259; Właźlak, 2010).

Stakeholders' involvement in public service delivery and privatization of public services are a consequence of an increasing number of tasks imposed on local government units and growing social expectations. This causes that local

governments are increasingly less able to meet both financial and organizational challenges (Benington, 2006; Leoński, 2006). This, in turn, forces the cooperation of the public sector with non-state actors (Kurzyna-Chmiel, 2013, p. 259; Kurzyna-Chmiel, 2012, pp. 111–127). In this particular case, it is difficult to speak of voluntary cooperation of equal subjects aiming to achieve a specific goal (Biernat, 1979). Cooperation in the field of educational tasks proves to be a form of rescue for local governments, whereas the transfer of public tasks does not exempt public entities from the resulting responsibility. It is also difficult to talk about the equality of the parties involved or, in fact, there being a common goal, as in the case of the transfer of schools the motives of the parties' actions are different (Kapuścińska, 2014; Strus, 2016).

In 2004, the legislator introduced the possibility of transferring a school of up to 70 students (small schools) to a legal or natural person on the basis of a resolution of the municipality council in accordance with Art. 5.5 of the Education System Act (Journal of Laws 2004, No. 256, item 2572 as amended). This is not the same as managing a school by other non-state actors. The introduced mechanism was supposed to prevent the elimination of small rural (local-government) schools which, due to their non-educational functions, i.e. integrational and cultural functions, were an important centre of local community life (Marzec-Holka, 2015, p. 154; Tołwińska-Królikowska, 2011). Small schools, especially in rural areas, are seen as the centre of rural life (Kwieciński, 2011, p. 423), testify to the development of a given locality and also influence its importance and development (Pilch, 2007, p. 15).

As stated by Kurzyna-Chmiel, the transfer of a school to a non-public body should be treated as a civil law action where the involved parties express (voluntarily) willingness to bi-directionally transfer public tasks (Kurzyna-Chmiel, 2013, p. 299). The essence of this solution is that the municipality retains the supervision and control over the performance of the tasks resulting from the contract. This solution is a manifestation of the autonomy of the local government unit, but due to the lack of definition of regulations, such as in the choice of the non-public entity to which the school is transferred, may lead to excessive freedom and pathology, as signalled from the very introduction of this capability of implementing public tasks (Kurzyna-Chmiel, 2013, p. 299; Majchrowicz-Jopek, 2012, pp. 164–181).

It should be pointed out, however, that the "transfer" mechanism does not relieve the municipal authorities from carrying out educational tasks. The legislator also provides for a hedge mechanism

in the event of the failure of a school overtaker to fulfil educational tasks. In this case, it is still the responsibility of the municipal authorities who are obliged to undertake further education (Majewska, 2015, p. 36). Therefore, this solution does not allow to completely “get rid of” the problem for local-government (small) schools, but it simply relieves them financially. Transferring a school to a non-public entity that undertakes a public task of education is considered a form of full stakeholders’ participation in public policy implementation. The subject undertaking this task does so voluntarily and performs the task free of charge (i.e. the school retains its public status) (Majewska, 2015, p. 37). This element distinguishes the school transferred by local government units to non-state entities from non-public schools⁴.

The mechanism by which a new or existing association (e.g. local one) or an existing legal person (usually a current principal or teacher engaged with the school) was to prompt social activation and mobilize the local community. It was also pointed out that the process of transferring the school itself, forcing local community contacts with the municipality authorities, could promote cooperation, which in turn could translate into other spheres of functioning of the commune (Kościńska-Bałdyga, 2015, pp. 22-23).

Methodology and research question

This article presents the preliminary results of research conducted in selected (targeted) rural and urban-rural municipalities in Poland. Based on the analysis of statistical data concerning the rationalization of the school network in Polish municipalities in the years 2006–2014, the author selected the municipality for qualitative research in two stages. In the first stage, the provinces (Polish: województwa/voivodships) were selected where in the indicated period the most, medium and the least number of schools have been liquidated⁵. Finally, the Pomorskie province (the least liquidated schools), Mazowieckie (medium number of schools), Świętokrzyskie province (the most liquidated schools) were chosen. The indicated provinces are

⁴ Such solution is provided for by the provisions of the Education System Act, whose Art. 5.1 and 5.2 indicate that the school system in Poland consists of public and non-public schools (and facilities) which may be managed by a local government unit, a legal person other than a local government and an individual (Journal of Laws 2004, No. 256, item 2572 as amended).

⁵ School closure is one of the forms of the process of educational policy rationalization at the local level. From the point of view of the authorities and the local community, this is the most radical solution, most likely to cause social resistance and carries the risk of losing social support for the current local government.

differentiated in terms of the school network as well as social and economic conditions. In the second stage – within the provinces – the municipalities were selected. The school liquidation process affected in particular rural and urban-rural municipalities due to demographic decline and rising costs of educational tasks. In some cases, the education policy consumed most of the municipal budgets, limiting development opportunities.

The selection of municipalities for qualitative research was made taking into account several factors, among others: the reaction of the local community to the local authorities decision on school liquidation, the process of liquidation (complete liquidation of the school, the transfer of the school to the non-public entity, the liquidation of the school and the informal agreement between the public authorities and the local community/non-governmental organization which has decided to restart the school as a non-public school and continuous to carry out educational tasks).

The qualitative part of the research was conducted using in-depth semi-structured interviews based on the interview scenario. The respondents represented the following groups of local community: local authorities (the executive body and representatives of the constituent body), local administration officials dealing with educational policy (section of education policy), local community representatives related to the local school (including parents of students, village leaders, local activists), school directors and teachers of local schools at risk of liquidation as well as representatives of non-public organizations which have undertaken to run local schools. In total, the author conducted 60 interviews in 12 (purposefully selected) municipalities in Poland.

The hypothesis set in the paper – the actual participation of non-state actors manifests itself in full engagement in public tasks, involving expenditure (financial, labour), personal commitment and responsibility. In this sense, participation can be considered a form of co-production – will be verified by responding to the following research questions: What are the limits between the apparent and the actual participation of stakeholders in education policy?, What are the circumstances of the participation of non-state actors in the public service provision?, What are the conditions of non-public entity’s participation in the public service delivery system? How do the roles of both public and non-public actors change in the context of socialization/co-production of public services?

Analysis of research results

Stakeholders' participation in educational tasks delivery – a form of public policy rationalization or political calculation?

The main argument for the rationalization of the school network was money-based, resulting from the high costs of education policy. These costs were generated by the outdated (also demographically) situation of the network of municipal schools, and thus personnel costs related to the maintenance of teaching staff (Herczyński and Sobotka, 2014, p. 22). It should be noted that the management of the elementary school network is the responsibility of the local government. The term “school network” should be understood as the arrangement of schools and educational establishments within the area of the administrative unit. As Herczyński and Sobotka point out, the network of schools consists of elements, such as the number of students, the degree of organization, the personnel, and the relationships between schools. These elements affect the management of education, which includes network planning, school creation/closure (including transfer to other entities), circuit design and organization of children’s transportation to schools (Herczyński and Sobotka, 2014, pp. 9–10, Dziemianowicz-Bąk and Dzierzowski, 2014, pp. 5–6).

This unreasonable and outdated school network, especially in rural areas, was a significant burden for local government budgets (Kaczyńska, 2017; NIK, 2015). It is largely, despite the intense rationalization efforts undertaken by local governments over the last few years, the effect of the previous system and the changes that led to the decentralization of education policy in the 1990s. The problem of irrational school networks understood as

inadequate to the current needs of the municipalities is linked to demographic changes resulting in fewer students, especially for small schools located in rural areas (March-Holka, 2015, pp. 147–161).

The simplest solution – from the viewpoint of self-governments – would be the closure of schools generating costs disproportionate to the number of students. However, closing those schools, being the most radical form of rationalization, could prove extremely costly to the municipal authorities in political and social terms (Kotarba, 2014). The solution of transferring a school to a non-public body, despite the legal basis, is not universal. It is difficult to estimate the scale of application of this mechanism, as confirmed by studies conducted by Herczyński and Sobotka, as well as the author of this article. As Herczyński and Sobotka point out, the problem of determining whether the school has been transferred under Art. 5g of the Higher Education Act or “without a contract” is due to the specifics of the data collected in the Educational Information System (Polish: System Informacji Oświatowej, SIO), where the way in which a non-public entity undertakes to manage a school (a bottom-up initiative after the closure of a public school or a transfer under Art. 5g of the Education System Act) (Herczyński, Sobotka, 2014, p. 18). In the meantime, the method of transferring the school is important for the further fate of the institution and the relationship between the non-state entity managing the school and the municipal authorities.

Given the general quantitative data on school-governing bodies, the tendency to reduce the percentage of elementary schools run by communes has been increasing over the last decade, contrary to the percentage of (public) schools managed by non-state actors (see Figure 1).

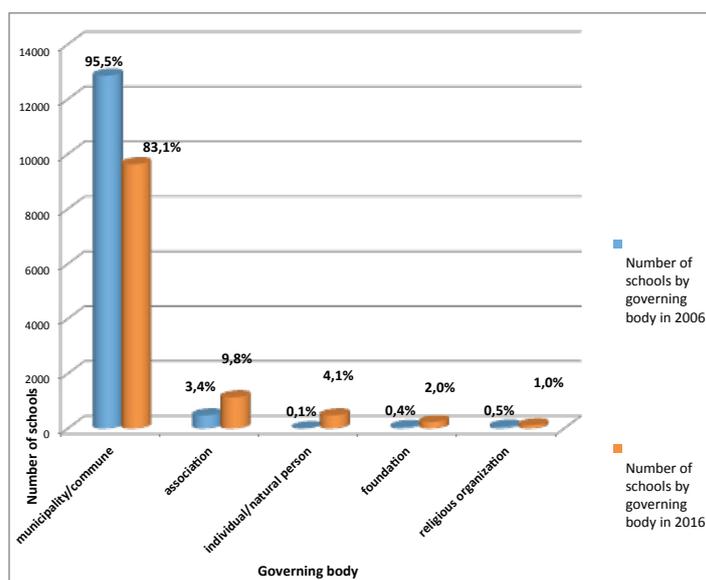


Fig. 1. Changes of school governing bodies in 2006–2016

Source: own study based on SIO, 2017.

Reducing the percentage of commune-run schools does not mean they are directly passed on to non-state actors. Reducing the number of schools managed by communes is also the consequence of their closure (including self-extinguishment due to lack of students). Simultaneously, the increase in the percentage of schools run by associations does not indicate that these entities have taken over schools directly from the communes (Herczyński and Sobotka, 2014, pp. 86–87). This group also comprises schools founded and from day one managed by these

associations. The data shown in Figure 1 presents a general tendency to assume public tasks (in this case educational) by non-state actors, which is part of the concept of privatization and co-production of public tasks. The most active type of non-public entities deciding to govern (public) schools and taking over from local governments was associations.

It should be noted that the share of non-state actors in the provision of educational services varied strongly depending on the region⁶ (see Table 1, Table 2).

Table 1

The percentage of schools managed by associations in 2006–2016 by region

Province	2006	2016	Change in percentage of schools
Dolnośląskie	4,4	7,6	+3,2
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	2,6	7,2	+4,6
Lubelskie	3,4	15,3	+11,9
Lubuskie	4,4	8,9	+4,5
Łódzkie	3,0	8,4	+5,4
Małopolskie	2,8	7,6	+4,8
Mazowieckie	5,0	9,2	+4,2
Opolskie	6,3	16,6	+10,3
Podkarpackie	1,4	8,9	+7,5
Podlaskie	6,5	13,3	+6,8
Pomorskie	3,0	6,6	+3,6
Śląskie	3,8	9,1	+5,3
Świętokrzyskie	4,2	17,4	+13,2
Warmińsko-mazurskie	3,3	11,7	+8,4
Wielkopolskie	0,6	9,3	+8,7
Zachodniopomorskie	2,9	5,4	+2,5

Source: own study based on SIO, 2017.

It results from the above that the greatest increase in the percentage of schools managed by associations over the past decade was observed in Świętokrzyskie province. At the same time, non-state actors running schools in this province were local and were created by communities engaged with particular schools. Most schools were transferred here to non-public entities from outside the commune. A significant growth was also recorded in the following provinces: Opolskie, Lubelskie, and Podkarpackie. The percentage of association-run schools in Zachodniopomorskie, Pomorskie, and Dolnośląskie provinces slightly increased as well. It can be said, therefore, that the majority of schools run by non-state entities are located in south-eastern Poland, whereas the least – in the north-western and central parts of the country. One reason for this was the specificity of the school network. In the case of south-eastern Poland, the network was much more fragmented and consisted of small schools (up to a dozen or so students). What is more, as indicated by the Polish Teachers' Union, for some districts small

schools accounted for almost half of all existing schools (ZNP, 2015).

In the context of factual stakeholders' participation in the provision of educational services by non-state actors – including mainly associations – there are a number of difficulties and risks related to ensuring the continuity and certainty of public services (Sześciło, 2014, pp. 5–13; Goodman and Loveman, 1991). The results of the empirical research conducted by the author showed that the process of non-public stakeholders' involvement in running local schools and providing educational tasks was influenced by several conditions, such as: a) the way of transferring the school, i.e. transferring on the basis of a contract or “without a contract” (solution approved by Polish law), b) specificity of a

⁶ The province (also called “voivodship”) is the highest unit of the territorial organization of Poland. Since January 1st, 1999 Poland has been divided into 16 self-governmental regions. Other self-governmental units include municipalities/communes (Polish gminy) and districts (Polish powiaty).

non-public entity, c) the role of teachers in the local community, d) the potential and social activity of the local community, and e) the community trust to local

authorities. All of these factors require separate in-depth research. Only the first one of them will be discussed in this paper.

Table 2

Number of schools and students by region in the school year 2015/2016

Country/province	Number of elementary schools	Number of students	Average number of students per school
Poland	13 563	2 480 793	182,90
Dolnośląskie	803	173 893	216,55
Kujawsko-pomorskie	686	136 404	198,84
Lubelskie	971	135 232	139,27
Lubuskie	339	67 324	198,59
Łódzkie	840	151 776	180,68
Małopolskie	1461	220 561	150,96
Mazowieckie	1774	369 931	208,53
Opolskie	397	55 687	140,27
Podkarpackie	1087	133 895	123,17
Podlaskie	416	72 526	174,34
Pomorskie	709	162 126	228,67
Śląskie	1267	279 560	220,64
Świętokrzyskie	564	74 704	132,45
Warmińsko-mazurskie	536	93 910	175,20
Wielkopolskie	1223	247 900	202,69
Zachodniopomorskie	496	105 364	212,43

Source: own study based on Oświata i wychowanie, 2016, pp. 167–171.

The method of stakeholders' involvement in the provision of educational tasks could take the form of transferring it to a non-public entity (in accordance with the provisions of Article 5g of the Education System Act) without the need for formal closure. However, in many cases, the community decides to close the school, with the process being preceded by informal arrangements with the school environment and the promise of assistance in continuing the school's functioning by a non-public body, should it assume the responsibility. The application of this solution was dependent on the position of local authorities in the community, the experience of cross-sectoral collaboration, the activity and potential of the local community in terms of participation in public life.

As one of the respondents stated⁷:

Officially the council of the municipality has adopted a resolution on schools liquidation. But for us it was a transformation (...) We wanted to avoid conflict with the community. I told them that we would renovate the buildings for each association (which will decide to run the school) to meet all the health and safety standards.

⁷ Interview with the mayor of the municipality located in Świętokrzyskie province, where after the formal liquidation of schools, the newly established local associations decided to run schools with the help of local authorities.

We gave them school buildings in a very good condition. The council of the municipality has adopted a resolution on the use of these buildings by each association for 6 years. For free. With some inhabitants – interested in establishing the association – even I went to court to help them with registration procedures (interview: S/I/W).

The most important factor in the process of school liquidation was the authority of the mayor and the trust of the local community to the authorities. This is evidenced by the statement of another respondent⁸:

There were meetings with the locals. And everywhere we have to set up such a four-person teams, in each school we gathered 2 teachers and 2 parents to create local entity to run the school. We decided to give them money for educational tasks. I believed that local entity will be better, because it will be local and it will reduce the costs for the budget. Formally, we had to go through a liquidation procedure. In the meantime the law has changed and it turned out that school up to 70 pupils can be easily passed on to non-public entity without all the pain (liquidation) (...) I do not remember exactly,

⁸ The interview with the mayor of the municipality located in Mazowieckie province. In this municipality, thanks to local authority support, parents and teachers created one local association that started to run all (four) school formally closed by local authorities due to difficult economic situation of the municipality.

but it was a pure formality. People knew that I was not stupid. They trusted me and I had authority. And as I say that we must close the school, so we really have to do this. But I also said: do not be afraid, because then we will open the school again. All in all, no one was specifically afraid, there was no social tension. Nothing has changed for students and parents. For teachers ... at the beginning. Nowadays they earn as much as teachers at schools run by local authorities. Well, they work maybe ... 3 hours longer than teachers in regular schools, but it is not a big deal... (interview: M/II/W).

The legal loophole that helps avoid the complete closure of a school and the provision of educational services by a non-public entity has advantages, indicated also in the case of transferring other public tasks to non-public actors (privatization). They include: expected improvements in service quality, reduced service costs, improved management efficiency, ability to select service providers by the local community and competition in the local services market (Hood, 1991). Privatization of services also presents a number of threats, including abuse, corruption in commissioning, uncertainty and service delivery, or questionable quality at the expense of price reduction (Pollitt, 2003; Bevir, 2009). In many of the surveyed communes, the problem was the very transfer of the school since it was not always accepted by both the local government and the local community. Analyzing this problem, three scenarios could be identified: a) local authorities have not considered the transfer of the school and were concerned only with the decommissioning of the facility (model no. 1 *radical scenario*), b) local authorities themselves proposed the transferring of educational tasks to non-public entities, combined with the declaration of financial support, organization and transfer of buildings (model no. 2 *partnership scenario*), c) local authorities have not planned to transfer but accepted (and usually avoided social resistance) the maintenance of the school and its management by a non-public entity, dependent on the potential, local community activity and willingness to engage in school management (model no. 3 *conciliation model*).

The first scenario was often applied by municipalities with a strong local authority which, due to the high costs and an unreasonable school network, saw the reduction as the most appropriate solution. For some local authorities, the transfer of a school to a non-public entity as an alternative to its liquidation was irrational. In their opinion, it was not about keeping a small school at all costs, but about creating better conditions for students. Running small school by a non-public entity did not change the situation. In their opinion, small schools did

not give children the opportunity to develop. This is evidenced by the statement of one of the mayors, who decided to liquidate schools in the municipality, not considering transferring them to other entities:

But this is stupid. And what does it change? Even if these children were taught what is the reason? Such children educated somewhere in the countryside... without any opportunities. For them even a departure to the nearby locality is an attraction. And what these children had so far? They were gathered somewhere in the school near the wood, then came home to help on the farms... Such are the realities in the countryside. What about interest clubs, tours and trips, swimming classes? Now they have it all. They have opportunities that they never even thought about (M/III/bW)⁹.

The authorities of these municipalities did not take into account the transfer of educational tasks also due to the lack of social potential, the lack of willingness of the local community to engage in such activities, and the fact that they believed it to be a make-do and temporary solution, and also one that in practice is still – at least partially – burdensome to the local government. The goal of these authorities was to rationalize municipal education policy, including financial issues (relief of the municipal budget), reorganization of the school network, and the management of property left over by schools. Rationalization was the condition for further development of the commune and the implementation of the investment.

The lack of involvement of local community and teachers in taking over schools from local authorities, was the reason for their complete liquidation in many municipalities. Residents were aware of the difficulties associated with carrying out public tasks including education. This is reflected in the following two statements of the respondents:

There were proposals from the local authorities to take over the school. But there was no desire to do this. Teachers were promised positions in other schools. There was potential, but was no will (M/III/R5)¹⁰.

But here, people were not so enthusiastic to take care of it (run the school). Neither the teachers nor the parents. It's a duty. And the wages are lower... because after the transfer of the school to non-public entities there is no Teachers' Charter¹¹ anymore.

Teachers work on the basis of contracts and do not earn as much as before (M/I/R1)¹².

⁹ The interview with the former mayor of the one of examined municipalities in Mazowieckie province.

¹⁰ The interview with the councillor of one of the examined municipality in Mazowieckie province.

¹¹ The Teachers' Charter – the Polish law of 1982 regulating the rights and obligations of teachers and is a basis for employing teachers. See more: Ustawa z dnia 26 stycznia 1982 r. Karta Nauczyciela, Dz.U. z 2017 r. poz. 1189, tekst jedn.

¹² The interview with the councilor of one of the examined municipalities in Mazowieckie province.

The second scenario, meanwhile, concerned those communes where the legitimacy of maintaining the existing network of schools and the fear of social resistance from parents and teachers – with the latter being the most opinionative and most able to mobilize the community of the local environment – went hand in hand. Another important argument was the local community's involvement shown as the engagement with NGOs or bottom-up initiatives for the local community. In such cases, the local government often offered assistance at the stage of creating a non-public entity that was to manage the school (visiting communes where such a solution already exists), or even wanted to invite outside non-public entities to run large-scale schools (interviews: P/IV/W; M/IV/W; M/IV/N2). The fact that the authorities planned to support the residents in the process of establishing the association is reflected in the following statements:

I immediately promoted such a simple idea that we will gather four people from each out of four schools planned for liquidation (in total 16 people), and that supposed to be the founding group of the association¹³, and that is how it was set up (...) .We were bossing all these things around. We were conducting and helping all the time, because we wanted it to work. It was only a matter of reducing the outrages costs. Honest! (M/II/W)¹⁴

We hit the wall. We knew that if we did not start to work, we would not create the association...well ... there will be no job for us (teachers). Everyone knows that this involves bureaucracy, paper work... Parents do not know the formalities. They supported us with a good word, they trusted us, they left children at school, but all documents and registration procedures left us (teachers) (...) The authorities helped us a lot especially at the beginning. From the beginning they had the idea that this should be one, local – non external – association. (M/II/DS/N/ST1)¹⁵

In the surveyed municipalities, there was a strong tendency to promote local associations. Authorities reluctantly agreed to transfer schools to external entities, which generally referred to as “business-oriented associations”. This is evidenced by statements made by one of the mayors of the examined commune:

Immediately, there was an idea to create one, local, municipal association. Because I had previously experiences, bad experiences, with this “business-oriented association” and I did not really want to go

¹³ In accordance with the applicable law to establish an association, it was necessary to collect at least 15 founding members.

¹⁴ The interview with the mayor of the one of examined municipalities in Mazowieckie province.

¹⁵ The interview with the teacher, director of the school run by local association, and the president of the association board in one of the municipalities in Mazowieckie province, where one (local) association was created by partners and teachers to run all four local schools, that due to financially reasons were planned to be liquidated.

with it in this case. We would not transfer schools to the external entity. Due to negative experiences. (M/II/W)

In this case, the rationalization was mainly of financial nature, albeit the authorities did not undertake radical actions for various reasons.

In the third case, the key link were the teachers of schools destined for closure. In order to be utilized, the existing social potential required organization that could be provided by a local leader. That role was often assumed by teachers due to the specificity of educational tasks and the rules of school management. Without that factor actually the initiative was nearly impossible to implement. The local community, in spite of its willingness and commitment, was not able to cope with the responsible task of managing a school. Absence of leader was the most common reason for no commitment of non-public stakeholders in educational tasks provision – even in the face of schools closure. It was about a leader who would come from a teaching environment (was associated with the school, familiarized with the educational law and able to mobilize people to act). As one respondent pointed out:

The potential was there, but there was no leader, someone who would pin things down and manage it all. (P/III/PS)¹⁶.

It has not always been the case that a person who proved successful in other areas of local community action was also competent in carrying out educational tasks. The involvement of teachers was evident in the surveyed communes only when they were not provided with jobs in other institutions in the community.

As one of the municipal official stated:

The mayor finally agreed to leave the smallest children in the school run by association. And yet there are people who decided that they would set up this association and run this school. Because it is not so easy ... It seems that there is a group of people and they could do it, but when it comes to action there is no volunteers anymore (S/III/P1)¹⁷

The lack of alternative made teachers involved in the process of setting up an entity that would take on the task and even launch it themselves, knowingly losing their jobs in their process. In this case, as in the first scenario, the goal was to rationalize municipal education policy.

Half of a year there was some hesitation. Can we do this? Are we strong enough? How to start? What to do? Yes, we stayed in touch with other associations that ran schools in that time. But 6 years ago there were not

¹⁶ The interview with the village leader, parent involved in school liquidation process in one of the municipalities in Pomorskie province.

¹⁷ The interview with the official of the municipal service centre for educational institutions in one of the examined municipalities in Świętokrzyskie province.

so many of them. Nobody knew how to organize it. The local authorities were not satisfied (we decided to create an association), because they had to transfer the subsidy for the implementation of educational tasks. And in fact they had no idea how to do this. (S/III/R2/N/ST)¹⁸

The authorities took action without considering social actors and their participation in the implementation of educational tasks. Possible establishment of a non-public entity that would undertake to manage a school (or involvement of an external entity) was treated by the authorities of the examined communes indifferently and in practice without any support from the communes outside the transfer of subsidies.

Conclusions

The actual participation of non-public stakeholders in public policies can be spoken of in the context of the full engagement of local communities in the process of providing public services. This form of participation involves devoting time, gaining knowledge, constant participation in the management process, involvement in a variety of school-related tasks, and responsibility.

The existing legal solutions are not always sufficient to avoid liquidation of school and directly transfer educational tasks to non-state actors (social organizations). The transmission of public tasks does not release local authorities' responsibility for the tasks. In addition, such a solution is possible provided that: a) there is potential in the local community to undertake a public task; b) local authorities will cooperate and support non-state actors in the implementation of educational tasks (partnership). The empirical studies have shown that in Polish municipalities the problem of transferring a school to a non-public entity was realized in three scenarios: a) local authorities have not considered the transfer of the school and were concerned only with the decommissioning of the facility (model no. 1 radical model), b) local authorities themselves proposed the transferring of educational tasks to non-public entities, combined with the declaration of financial support, organization and transfer of buildings (model no. 2 cooperation model), c) local authorities have not planned to transfer but accepted (and usually avoided social resistance) the maintenance of the school and its management by a non-public entity, dependent on the potential, local community activity and willingness to engage in school management (model no. 3 conciliation model).

¹⁸ The interview with local councillor of the one of researched municipalities in Świętokrzyskie province and at the same time teacher, the director of the school run by association and the member of the association created to run school previously maintained by local authorities.

The results of the research show that the local authorities usually applied a straightforward solution from their point of view, i.e. complete liquidation. Bearing in mind that such a decision was likely to provoke social resistance, they hedged their bets by providing job places for the teachers employed in decommissioned schools. Ensuring their jobs reduces the risk of social conflict in the municipality. At the same time it effectively eliminated the idea of creating local associations that would run the schools. Without the involvement of teachers such schools could not arise. This situation was observed in eight of the surveyed municipalities. The authorities rarely decided to initiate themselves the creation of local associations and transfer them local schools. Initiators of such actions were only authorities of two of investigating municipalities (second scenario). Also relatively rare were cases when local authorities did not want to create associations and transfer them schools. But to avoid social resistance in a municipality, they agreed on running schools (at least some of local schools or only schools with grades 1–3) by non-state actors. Despite their consent, they did not identify with these schools. Their relationships were limited to providing education subsidy (in the amount guaranteed by the law) to associations, without any additional support from the local budget. This situation was also observed only in two surveyed municipalities (third scenario). However, it is important to remember that the process of transferring a school to non-public entities depends on a number of factors. Each of the municipalities is characterized by other determinants and potentialities. It seems reasonable, to treat every municipality as a case study rather than generalized observations. Nevertheless, some similarities have been noted and presented in the paper.

Factual participation of non-public stakeholders in the implementation of public tasks can be a manifestation of the rationalization of public policy. An example may be the implementation of educational tasks by non-state actors discussed in this article, which in many cases has proved to be a rescue for schools at risk of closure as well as an important support for local authorities that – due to the need to reduce costs – were forced to shut down cost-ineffective institutions, aware of the consequences of their actions. Active participation of the local community (and its formal representation, e.g. in the form of associations) not only led to a change in the governing body, but also to a number of social changes within local communities and changes in the relations between social actors and local authorities.

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The Non-public Stakeholders' Participation in the Implementation of Educational Tasks as a Form of Education Policy Rationalization. The Case of Local Education Policy in Poland

Summary

The aim of the article is to present the process of non-state actors' involvement in the implementation of educational tasks. The author focused on the most engaging form of participation in terms of education policy, which is the acquisition of education tasks, including school management by non-public stakeholders. The non-public stakeholders' participation in education policy implementation discussed in the article has been present for a few years now and used by Polish municipalities as a tool to reduce costs of educational tasks. The costs of education policy implementation have been steadily increasing for years, disproportionately to the number of students. The problem of high costs of education is particularly acute for small municipalities, especially rural and urban-rural. Looking for solutions to rationalize local expenditures and curb spending on education policy, which in some municipalities consumes more than 60% of the total budget spending, the authorities look for new ways to save money.

Such a solution is the possibility of transferring small schools (up to 70 students) to non-public stakeholders (including social organization or natural person) to avoid their liquidation. On the one hand, the implemented solution was created to support local governments, which, in the face of growing educational expenditures, had limited investment opportunities in other areas. On the other hand, this solution corresponds to local communities' needs and takes into account the specificity of rural areas and the relationships within local communities (usually small, rural) for which the school was not only educational institution, but also integration and meetings centre.

In this article the author analyzes the conditions of involving non-public stakeholders in the process of carrying out educational tasks as well as the current formal and legal basis of this procedure. The process of implementing educational tasks by non-public stakeholders refers to the concept of co-production of public services, which is the theoretical framework of the present article. The analysis presented in the text is based on the concept of co-production as a form of performance of public tasks involving members of the local community who contribute and bear partial responsibility for the performance of public services, with a view to improving their quality and delivery standards.

In the course of the analysis, the author tries to verify the hypothesis, that the actual participation of non-state actors manifests itself in full engagement in public tasks, involving expenditure (financial, labour), personal commitment and responsibility. In this sense, participation can be considered a form of co-production.

By examining the hypothesis, the researcher poses the following research questions: What are the constraints between the apparent and the actual participation of the stakeholders in education policy?, What are the circumstances of the participation of non-public actors in the public service provision? What are the conditions of the non-public entity's participation in the public service delivery system? How do the roles of both public and non-public actors change in the context of co-production of public services?

In the article, the author uses the following research methods: the analysis of existing sources, including the content of normative acts and documents as well as the literature of the subject. In addition, the partial empirical studies conducted by the author in Polish municipalities were used in the publication. In total, the author conducted 60 semi-structured interviews based on the interview scenario. The selection of respondents to the study was purposeful and selected in two stages. In the first stage, the author selected the provinces (województwa) to study, among those in which the most and the least local schools were closed in 2006–2014. Then, the author selected the municipalities in each of the provinces (4 municipalities in each province). In the second stage, the respondents were selected. In the group of respondents were the representatives of local authorities (executive and constituent bodies), the representatives of the school community, the representatives of social organizations, local community members as well as public officials and local leaders of the selected municipalities.

The conclusions of the research indicate that the mechanism in the form of participation of non-public actors in the performance of educational tasks is in practice difficult to implement and depends on a number of factors, such as: the level of local community activity, the experience of cooperation between public authorities and local community in other areas, the attitude of local authorities to cooperate with social actors. The reluctance to cooperate, the lack of mutual trust between local governments and local communities, and the domination of the traditional model of local governance with the leading position of local authorities (as a creator and public service contractor) make the running of schools by non-public actors rarely practiced. Frequently, the main problem is the relationship and attitude of both local authorities and the local community, which make this solution impossible to implement. In the course of the research three models of relations between local authorities and local stakeholders were identified: a) the so-called "radical model" – local authorities plan to liquidate the school entirely and do not plan to transfer it

to other entities; b) the so-called “cooperative model” – local authorities propose to delegate educational tasks to non-public stakeholders declaring financial and non-financial support; c) the so-called “conciliation model” – local authorities do not plan to transfer the school, but in

a face of local community initiative they agree to let it be run by a non-public stakeholder.

Keywords: policy, participation, co-production, public governance, education policy, non-public stakeholders.