

Psycho-Semantics of Management Constructs: Expression of Democracy among Schoolteachers

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Introduction: The scientific problem of the research

The background of the empiric research was an anonymous postal survey of 289 Lithuanian school teachers and 187 school managers, in the form of an open ended questionnaire. The aim was to identify the most important (according to the respondents) problems relating to school management, the expression of democracy and authoritarianism in school management, the problems of self-governance in an organisation and school management development perspectives. This paper in particular presents data analysis of the answers provided by pedagogues to an open ended question. The question was as follows: *Are there any manifestations of democracy in your school? If "yes" (or "sometimes"), in what way are these rudiments asserted in your school?*

289 respondents provided 634 statements to the question. Using the method of qualitative (hermeneutic) content analysis, the empirical statements were generalized into 42 semantically homogeneous categories. The control procedure of the validity and inter-subjectivity of the categories are presented in the paper by G. Šaparnis and G. Merkys (2000a). Afterwards, quantitative data analysis was carried out. Using the method of descriptive statistics the categories were rated by the frequency with which they were referred to. With the help of cluster analysis taxonomic regularity of the categories was researched (Šaparnis, 2000b).

From the aspect of methodology the research is based on an empirical social research approach to a combined qualitative and quantitative research – triangulation (Denzin, 1970; Cohen & Manion, 1994; Bitinas, 1998; Charles, 1999; Mayring, 1988; Kardelis, 1997; Lamnek, 1993; Merkys, 1999).

The conceptual basis of the research was an attempted combination (congruency) of different theoretical traditions (nowadays referred to as classical). The following theories are implied: humanistic psychology, an approach of social psychology to an authoritarian personality, authoritarian social relationships and the theory of symbolic inter-actionism (Rogers, 1969; Maslow, 1971; Adorno, 1969; Oesterreich, 1974; Blumer, 1969).

Moreover, an important theoretical context of this research is the research on management (including education management) and organizational behavior (Jucevičienė, 1996; Jucevičius, 1996; Želvys, 1999; Kalvaitis, 1997; Večkienė, 1996; Targamadžė, 1996 and others). However, it should be admitted that the authors failed to find any evidence of diagnostic research systematically and

professionally carried out in Lithuania on education management. Research deficiency in this field is a significant aspect of this research problem.

For substantiation of the theoretical part of the research and data interpretation, a significant role was played by a particular branch of psychology – psycho-semantics (Sinchenko and Mescheriakov, 1996). One of its main concerns is research on what subjective implications individuals and social groups tend to attribute to verbal (lexical) stimuli. Reference to the analysis of psycho-semantic structures provided an opportunity to achieve substantial results in such fields as differential psychology, psycho-diagnostics and social attitudes (Osgood, 1959). In our particular research the role of the word-stimulus was played by a stimulating material formed on the basis of a lexical unit “*democracy*”, presented to the respondents in different problematic contexts on organization management.

The **aim** of the research was to disclose the psycho-semantics of the opinions held by comprehensive school educators on the expression of democracy in education management.

This aim was achieved using a non-standardized questionnaire composed of open-ended questions, and through combining the methods of qualitative and quantitative content analysis.

The process of management in a comprehensive school was the **object** of the research

The problem of any scientific research may be defined in the form of a question because it is a logical form of a scientific problem (Merkys, 1995). A scientific problem of our research is defined by a series of definite questions:

1. What is the rating law of subjective psycho-semantic categories which reflect the expression of democracy among school teachers?
2. What is the character of the taxonomies of psycho-semantic categories of the referred "topics" which empirically result from data rating?
3. What is the inner structure of empirically traced psycho-semantic units which reflect the expression of democracy?

Research results and discussion

Relying on the selected and proven scheme of statistical data processing, cluster analysis of the formed categories was carried out. This provided an opportunity to form the taxonomy of categories. The configuration of computerized dendrograms and the data of standardized cluster distance scales show that it is most expedient to refer to a 3 cluster model (Tables 1, Table 2). Category rating data statistically may reasonably form 3 homogeneous groups (noted by the rating). It is symptomatic that one of the clusters consists of only 2 categories. These are the categories that outscore other categories by the frequency rating they noted.

A grounded qualitative interpretation of 3 groups (clusters) is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Qualitative interpretation of taxonomy results according to a 3 cluster model

Group number in the dendrogram	Interpretation of the model of 3 groups (clusters)
Group 1	<i>high rating</i>
Group 2	<i>medium rating</i>
Group 3	<i>low rating</i>

Table 2. Rating of categories of teachers' opinions about the expression of democracy in the organization (N=289)

Category	Noted frequency	%	Group number by a 3 cluster model
It is permitted to express opinions, give suggestions	79	27%	1
Majority of decisions are made collectively	73	25%	1
Functioning of schoolchildren's self-governance	44	15%	2
Possibility to work independently and creatively	43	15%	2
Functioning of the school council independently and actively	40	14%	2
Schoolchildren can express their opinions	36	12%	2
Parents are involved in school life	30	10%	2
Good, close community relations	25	9%	2
Functioning of teachers' trade union	22	8%	2
The aim is to educate independent individuals	18	6%	2
Good teacher-schoolchildren relations	17	6%	2
Introduction of election practice at school	17	6%	2
Imitation of democracy	13	4%	3
Researches and opinion polls are carried out	11	4%	3
Tolerant school leaders	11	4%	3
Opinions of majority are considered	10	3%	3
Moderate control	9	3%	3
School work plans are discussed with teachers	9	3%	3
No barriers for qualification update	8	3%	3
Pupils' rights are discussed and acknowledged	7	2%	3
School – like an open community	7	2%	3
Opinion of teacher majority can change leaders' decisions	7	2%	3
Inter-reliance	6	2%	3
Teachers' personal matters are considered	6	2%	3
Delegation of decisions and responsibilities	6	2%	3
Schoolchildren plan and organise extra-curricula	6	2%	3

Category	Noted frequency	%	Group number by a 3 cluster model
activities			
Criticism of school leaders is normally accepted	5	2%	3
Schoolchildren are allowed to choose extra-curricula activities	4	1%	3
Information sharing	4	1%	3
Schoolchildren's education is based on democratic principles	4	1%	3
Teacher is a child's helpmate	3	1%	3
Too much democracy	3	1%	3
It is possible to remove an "intolerable" teacher	3	1%	3
Functioning of informal groups is tolerated	3	1%	3
Democracy is discussed at sittings	2	1%	3
Work is organised keeping to self-approved rules	2	1%	3
Work load is discussed and allotted by teachers themselves	2	1%	3
Qualification assessment commission	1	0,3%	3
Daring communication with schoolchildren's parents	1	0,3%	3
Schoolchildren are permitted to apply to school administration at any time	1	0,3%	3
No ignorance because of political beliefs	1	0,3%	3
Functioning of school radio	1	0,3%	3
Sharing of teaching experience	1	0,3%	3

From the aspect of interpretation the greatest attention in this context is paid to the categories characterized by the highest frequency with which they were noted. It is symptomatic that by the dimension of "democracy" top positions are taken by the categories of the same content (Table 3).

The main part in the structure of teachers' conception about the expression of democracy at school is taken by the dimension of *opinion expression* (whether an opportunity to express it exists or not) and the dimension of *collegiality*.

Table 3. Examples of category statements that reflect the dimension of democracy

Category	Statements
It is permitted to express opinions, give suggestions	Expression of one's opinion
	Teachers can express their opinion on various questions
	Very often it is possible to express one's opinion and suggest various things
	It is possible to express opinions and give suggestions
Majority of decisions are made collectively	Majority of decisions are made collectively, after discussions with teachers
	Some matters often depend on teachers' suggestions
	Parents, teachers and pupils take part in decision making
	Urgent problems are solved collectively

Generally, the keyword "*opinion*" takes an exceptional position in the researched psycho-semantic structures and quite frequently appears in category formulations. Apart from the categories provided in Table 3, such categories as "*Pupils can express their opinion*", which refer to the commented keyword are worth mentioning. If we formed a compound frequency rating of the categories based on the keyword "*opinion*" it would break all records in comparison with other categories. Naturally, psycho-semantic structures are not a purely speculative and subjective matter; they more or less reflect real (objective) social relations. At this point we may make a hypothetical assumption about empirically traced and proven regularity of criteria. In other words, it may be soundly claimed that the *character of opinion expression* in the school community is the main criterion which differentiates the prevailing management style in the organization. The traced regularity of criteria is significant from two perspectives – diagnostic (e.g., compiling standardized closed-type questionnaires on school management) and school management monitoring (e.g., granting leaders categories in management, etc.). The dialogue, which, inter alia, means a person's ability to listen to and tolerate other opinions in social relations, is an essential indicator of an anti-authoritarian personality type and for an authoritarian personality is the basis to take psycho-corrective measures. In turn, speech (opinion) freedom, according to political sciences, is an attributive feature of democratic society.

Therefore, two circumstances, namely: 1) an exceptional position of the keyword "*opinion*" in the psycho-semantic structure of the surveyed teachers and 2) theoretical validity of the phenomenon of opinion expression (as a basic indicator) in social psychology, management and political sciences, allows an understanding of this point as the main criterion of a dominating management style in an organization. In other words, specificity of opinion expression in an organization is one of the most reliable criteria and diagnostic indicators with which to differentiate school management style.

Moreover, we could hypothetically claim that the stated fact is culturally specific, and especially relevant for the countries and cultures of the so called “new democracy.” It is possible to make an assumption that in societies with deeper democratic traditions, free expression of opinions is an unquestioned matter. Therefore, from the perspective of its differential potential, this criterion is not as relevant and significant as it may be for the countries of “new democracy” to which Lithuania is referred. It is no secret that most contemporary school leaders and teachers started their professional profiles in a system where the expression of non-conjuncture opinion was not only unwelcome but even risky. In the decades of assimilation of social mechanisms, an inadequate attitude towards public expression of an “*unacceptable*” or “*different*” opinion was formed. On the other hand, this stated fact reveals the potential for school management development based on appropriate and modern attitudes towards free expression of opinions in the school community.

From the perspective of school management development we would like to juxtapose the stated fact with other facts traced during the survey. It should be noted that while designing strategic visions of school management (Šaparnis, 2000a; Šaparnis *et al.*, 2003) school leaders gave priority to “*community and partnership development*” and “*intention to perfect*”, whereas teachers preferred “*improvement of school microclimate*”, *etc.* It is obvious that if free expression of opinions in a school community is not guaranteed, the reality for strategic management visions and expectations of both, leaders and teachers will be very problematic. An assumption may be made that opinion expression guarantee is a systematic determinant in the managerial and social relations of an organisation. In other words, guaranteeing (or neglecting) the dimension under discussion makes a direct impact on a number of other significant management dimensions. Consequently, the noted congruency of the surveyed facts assuredly emphasizes an exceptional role of *the character of opinion expression* in organizational culture and modern effective management.

In this context other significant tendencies of democracy expression in school management are worth discussing; moreover, the results of the survey give a sound basis from which to do this.

A significant criterion which allows detection of a democratic management style and a type of social relations formed at school is functionality of active institutions within a school. It is shown in the formulation of corresponding categories and authentic statements given by the surveyed (Table 4).

The character of psycho-social relations and the social microclimate in an organization is also considered to be an important criterion. It is proved by such categories as: “*Good, warm community relations*”; and “*Good teacher-pupils relations*”, *etc.* Alongside the phenomenon of opinion expression discussed in this context, an important criterion is the dimensions reflecting psycho-semantics of “*independence and initiative*”. Examples of the corresponding categories are:

“Opportunity to work independently and creatively”; “No barriers for qualification update” and others.

Table 4. Examples of categories’ statements that reveal functionality of school’s active institutions

Category	Examples of statements
Functioning of schoolchildren's self-governance	Schoolchildren's self-governance functions at school
	In schoolchildren's self-governance
	The board of monitors
	Schoolchildren's Seimas (Parliament)
Functioning of school council independently and actively	Independent functioning of the school council
	Functioning of the school council
	The school council functions
	The school council functions actively
Functioning of teachers' trade union	Teachers' trade union was set up
	Teachers' trade union exists
	Trade union exists
	Teachers' trade-union functions actively
Introduction of election system at school	The school committee is elected
	President's elections (in the schoolchildren's council)
	School director's democratic elections (by secret vote)
	Election of the school council

With reference to the selected strategy of statistical data processing it was aimed to also detect, alongside the regularities of ratings and taxonomy categories, regularities of category structures as well. In order to disclose statistical links and to switch to a reduced number of primary variables factorial analysis was used. Prior to this, while analyzing the matrix of inversions, we eliminated categories which were irrelevant for factor analysis.

Factorization of categories gave acceptable results. 12 primary variables (categories) were reduced and generalized in the model of 5 factors (Table 5).

Statistical linkage of the majority of categories with factors and their inside grouping in terms of interpretation appeared to be theoretically significant in the factor model of democracy categories. It should be noted that rather high correlation of category ratings with the extracted factors were obtained. This is evident in the fluctuation limits of the correlation coefficient values ($0.42 \leq r \leq 0.85$). This shows that formed categories are appropriate since they meet the methodological norm of the *construct validity* commonly accepted in diagnostic researches.

Meaningful grouping of categories inside the factor should be considered. In the factor model of categories of democracy factors, F1 and F5 clearly reflect the institutions of democracy, factor F2 – psycho-social relations, factor F4 – the

dimension of freedom. A little more problematic is the interpretation of factor F3, consisting of variables reflecting meaningfully non-homogeneous dimensions.

Table 5. Factorial analysis results
(teachers' opinions about the expression of democracy at school)

Factor number	Categories	Values of factor weights
F1	Functioning of schoolchildren's self-governance	0,85
	Functioning of school council independently and actively	0,84
	Functioning of teachers' trade union	0,68
F2	Good, warm community relations	0,77
	Good teacher-pupil relations	0,73
F3	The aim is to develop independent individuals	0,76
	Parents are involved in school life	0,67
	Majority of decisions are made collectively	0,42
F4	Schoolchildren are permitted to express opinions, give suggestions	0,85
	Opportunity to work independently and creatively	0,63
F5	Pupils can express their opinions	0,75
	Introduction of election system at school	0,69

Note. Computer extracted factors explain 60,7 % of all factors

Conclusions and discussion

The main part in the structure of teachers' conception about the expression of democracy at school is taken by *the dimension of opinion expression* (whether community members can express it) and *the dimension of collegiality*.

It is expedient to state hypothetically that the character of opinion expression dominant at school as an organization is the main criterion which differentiates the prevailing management style at school. From the diagnostic aspect this is the main indicator which allows the recognition of a concrete management type in factual school management reality.

It is possible to make an assumption that opinion expression guarantee in a school community is a systemic determinant of management and social relations in the organization. In other words, guarantee of the dimension under discussion has a direct impact on many other essential dimensions of management.

A hypothetical assumption may be formed that the discussed criterion of opinion expression is culturally specific, i.e. more relevant for the so called "new democracy" countries.

Alongside the phenomenon of opinion expression, a significant criterion which allows a more reliable differentiation of a democratic management style and type of social relations formed in the organization, is active functioning of school institutions (school council, trade unions, schoolchildren's self-governance, etc.)

In the psycho-semantic structure of teachers' opinions (on the question of democracy expression in an organisation) a significant role is played by those categories which disclose expectations of creativity, independence and initiative, and of a favourable psychological and social climate.

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