Student councils as an example of building school community – creating, way of functioning and cooperation with teachers

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Abstract:

The paper presents the results of a research on the student councils in Warsaw high schools. School principals, their deputies, student council supervisors and representatives of student council board were interviewed. The aim of the study was to find the features, problems and way of functioning of student councils inside the school community. Research has shown two faces of student self-governance. One is connected with activities for the community, not only at school, but also local, in which the supervisor is a guide, and the pedagogical council supports and contributes to greater motivation in activities, the other shows student council as frustrated fake who

follows the guidance of a director or supervisor and has no strength or desire to encourage the school community to get involved in self-governance activities. It is crucial to select and train proper student council supervisors that can attract active pupils and support them to lead their own colleagues with student council.

1. Introduction. Terminology arrangements

Self-governance is “the principle according to which bottom-up norms of coexistence of individuals in a group of students are shaped (...) depending on the inner-directedness of the group, possession and actual use of decision-making powers (...)” (Radziewicz, 1989, p. 8) or “the principle of coexistence of self-controlling social groups” (Łobocki, 1999, p. 118). Student council is a “form of peer community organization operating on the democratic principles of intercourse between individuals and between groups” (Radziewicz, 1989, p. 9). Importantly, all students of the specific school are self-government and student council, so it is impossible to “unsubscribe” (Radziewicz, 1989, p. 9). Student council activities enables community issues solving and also serves to represent the interests of all students in front of the school management, pedagogical council and parents (Sowiśło, 1996). However, as Bogusław Śliwerski notes, the student council cannot enforce resolutions or claims that result from the perceived necessity of changes (Śliwerski, 2013).

Aleksander Kamiński emphasizes the importance of self-governance in the educational process, because it allows to achieve group goals, teaches cooperation and responsibility. Self-government activities are based on both, interests and needs as well as obligations. In addition, it allows you to build your own social position and play a significant role in the community (Kamiński, 1985). At the same time, the older the students, the more they can share responsibility for the school's performance (Śliwerski, 2013).

What determines the essence of self-governance include: a sense of dignity and personal freedom of students, increasing their sense of security, creating a sense of having equal opportunities, strengthening

the sense of community, creating moral norms within the group, regulating them with group members, shaping their moral responsibility, understanding authorities, shaping the feeling that you can have your own beliefs, learning tolerance, helping others and developing higher feelings. Self-governance strengthens the feeling of mutual support, cooperation, responsibility for others, and partnership in students. Student council is a place where leaders are born. Conditions are created to shape self-control, self-discipline, self-assessment and readiness for pro-social behavior (Radzewicz, 1986). The student council favors undertaking tasks that relate to the real life situations of young people, their interests and hobbies, strengthens their decision-making and teaches how to cooperate to achieve common goals, activates the entire school community (Łobocki, 1999).

2. Student council as a school community

As Aleksander Kamiński notes, student council cannot be based only on the activities of a group of activists – because it is actually a lack of local government. Student council should include the entire community of a school to activate the largest possible group of young people in social activities and teach them how to spend their free time (Kamiński, 1985). In educational interactions related to student self-government, it is important to set an example by a mentor, shape habits through peer interaction “satisfying the diverse needs, interests and aspirations of young people” adequate to their age (Kamiński, 1985, p. 50). As part of self-government activities, students can plan, organize, control and evaluate life of the school community (Sowiśło, 1996). These activities develop the sense of community, which is strengthened through the objectives of education, self-education, upbringing and self-development. Therefore, undertaking joint activities for the benefit of people who are members of the school community contributes to the existence of a “educational community” at school (Szymański, 2013), while the school itself is, in the idea of self-governance, a joint work of school teachers and students (Radzewicz & Mirgos, 1988).

Thanks to the activities of the student council, it is possible to shape socio-altruistic attitudes and a sense of satisfaction from cooperation, to promote self-sacrifice and helpfulness, to teach responsibility for tasks, yourself and others and common matters, to fight evil, to rebuild interpersonal relations, and to learn how to care for others as well as how to develop high-level culture of social coexistence (Kamiński, 1985).

For a local government to function well, it must operate in a favorable atmosphere. The pedagogical council should understand the sense of self-government and what forms of its activities are acceptable. It is important to properly prepare the student council supervisor. He needs to be ready to activate young people, build on their interests and inventiveness and provide feedback on their effectiveness. It also is very important to let young people make mistakes. It is advisable for the student council supervisor to have certain personal predispositions, which include: sense of humor, serenity, justice, kindness and care, enthusiasm, perseverance and understanding of the essence of student council existence and activity (Kamiński, 1985).

3. Threats to student self-governance

Julian Radzewicz (1991) lists factors that have a negative impact on the results of student councils' work:

- the convenience of adults who either leave students complete freedom or make it difficult for students to act by creating procedures that are difficult to overcome. Their role becomes supervisory and accounting;
- focusing on making activities not so efficient as attractive; hence the focus is on statistics that obscures the actual activities and directs their attention to rare, festive and clearly visible actions;
- representative function, which dominates the rest, is connected to above; the student council is visible only during the ceremonies and festivals, but does not represent students, but the school and its “adult” interests; the student council plays the role of the school’s visiting card, but it is manipulated by the school management and teachers; it is the result of the belief that student self-government is “given to students by adults” (Radzewicz, 1989, p. 7), which makes adults mainly assess and control youth activities;
- there are also cabaret and party activities focused on entertainment – which is in line with the expectations of young people, but at the same time is removed from important matters related to actual participation in the process of creating the school.

Student council operates in a particular school, with its structures, staff, dependencies, attitudes and expectations of teachers and management, resistance or indifference of peers to pro-social activity (Radziejewicz, 1989). These specific conditions can strengthen or weaken student self-governance. Particular difficulties can be multiplied by an inadequate student council supervisor, his lack of commitment, carelessness, laziness, lack of resolution, lack of responsibility and no relevance in actions (Kamiński, 1985).

What's more, excessive addiction to adults' decisions, excessive competition with peers, overwhelming overload of duties, lack of maturity and experience, neglecting other duties, lack of ability to cope with stress and moral dilemmas pose a threat to those young people who actively operate in student council (Kamiński, 1985) & (Łobocki, 1999). They can lead to apparent actions only, actions antagonistic to other school organizations, isolation or realization of own goals, inconsistent with the needs of the school community (Kamiński, 1985).

4. The method

The aim of the research was to find out features, problems and way of functioning of student councils in Warsaw high schools on the school community¹. The problem that is undertaken in this paper is the search for an answer to the question to what extent the activities of student council contribute to building community in the school community.

The research was carried out using the interview method, which allows direct contact with the respondent. The survey covered representatives of 16 Warsaw high schools²: In the research participated:

- School principals or deputies; these persons perform their function from 9 months to 20 years. Only two people from the respondents performed the role of the student council supervisor.
- Representatives of student council boards, boys and girls aged 16 to 19, with various experience in the student council (from several months to 4 years, with few declaring that they were representatives of student council also at an earlier stage of education)
- Teachers – supervisors of student councils. The surveyed teachers are usually pedagogues with extensive experience – their experience varies from 7 to 39 years (average 18.41), although they worked as student councils' supervisors much shorter: from 1 to 25 years (average 6.13). They were both men and women. Among the surveyed student councils' supervisors there is a great diversity in subject competences – they teach one or two following subjects: history, Polish, English, German, French, social studies, mathematics, physical education, biology, chemistry, knowledge about culture, ethics, geography, nature, logistics subjects, basics of entrepreneurship. They are active people who, apart from taking care of the student council, also perform other functions at school.

The research was conducted in 2018, from February to June. First, interviews were conducted according to a prepared guide. Most of the interviews were recorded (if the respondent's consent was not obtained, notes were made) and then transcribed. This paper presents the part of the results that allows to answer the main research goal.

5. The findings

Analyzing the statements of three entities of the school community: principals, supervisors of student councils and their representatives, common areas for this trilogy were sought, which indicate a pro-community impact of student council in the school. The following levels of community were identified:

¹ The research presented in the article is part of more extensive research. They were implemented in cooperation with the Center for Social Communication in Warsaw. It is an institution which activities also include the care of the self-governance of Warsaw schools. The representative of CfSC, Mrs. Dorota Kapuścińska, brokered contact with respondents and pointed out the range of problems that are interesting to the institution to research. Students in the "school pedagogy and pedagogy of giftedness" specialization at the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw as part of the subject "Specialization research project" assisted in the implementation of the research. The research was headed by Joanna Łukasiewicz-Wieleba, PhD.

² LIX LO Mistrzostwa Sportowego im. J. Kusocińskiego, Zespół Szkół nr 35, Zespół Szkół Elektronicznych i Licealnych, Zespół Szkół nr 36, Zespół Szkół Gastronomicznych im. E. Pijanowskiego, XV LO z Oddz. Dwujęzyczne im. N. Żmichowskiej, VII LO im. J. Słowackiego, Zespół Szkół im. Bohaterów Narwiku, Zespół Szkół nr 42, XXVIII LO im. J. Kochanowskiego, LXIII Liceum Ogólnokształcące im. Lajosa Kossutha, XXXVIII Liceum Ogólnokształcące im. St. Kostki Potockiego, LI LO im. T. Kościuszki, Zespół Szkół nr 33, CV Liceum Ogólnokształcące im. Z. Herberta.

1. Dialogue between school subjects:
 - mediation between the student community and other school personnel (headmaster, teachers, parents, student council supervisor, Student Ombudsman);
 - combining the goals of different subjects or working out compromises (e.g. reconciling students' expectations and legal requirements);
 - implementation to communicate with various people on various levels;
2. Integration
 - integration of the student community;
 - representing all students, being "their voice";
 - integration with other school entities (teachers, parents);
 - integration with the local community;
 - making school a friendly place;
3. Sensitivity to the needs of the community
 - recognizing the needs of students, providing information about them to the teaching council, choosing and planning how to meet them; assessment of the consequences of their implementation for the entire school community;
 - planning and conducting class meetings or implementing other forms of information transfer (contact boxes, Internet) to obtain information on important matters;
 - resolving disputes between students and working out compromises;
 - responding to problem situations at school;
 - implementation of "what students consider important";
4. Organization
 - running a school newspaper, school website, volunteering, radio station, Facebook fan-page, conducting cultural and educational campaigns, courses, additional activities, trips and all kinds of events and projects;
 - cultural events: trips, concerts, performances, festivals, international days, debates, workshops with interesting people, theme days (Teacher's Day, Tea Day, Chocolate Day, First Spring Day, Christmas Eve meeting, etc.);
 - thematic competitions, sports competitions;
 - obtaining lockers for students, impact on the selection and cost of food in the canteen, organizing parking for students;
 - providing help during recruitment to school;
 - preventive measures (nutrition, HIV, diabetes, obesity), information campaigns (renewable energy sources, road safety);
 - charity actions going beyond the school community for institutions or people of the local community (as part of charity actions, student councils organize financial or material help for people in need, institutions and animals, e.g. Penny Mountain (Góra Grosza), Noble Package (Szlachetna Paczka), donations of blood or bone marrow, collection of toys for children from an orphanage or Social Welfare Center, collecting bottle caps, collecting funds for institutions, e.g. hospitals, reading to children, organizing workshops and others);
 - implementation of students' ideas, if "they do not conflict with the school mission, school statute and other legal regulations";
5. Activation
 - representatives of the student council are an active part of the youth focused on recognizing but also solving the problems at school;
 - activate other students to act for the school or the local community;
 - they are an example, but they also show the benefits of being active;
 - they reach for teachers' help in activating other students;
 - other interested parties join the work of student council – although sometimes their functions are "only on paper";
6. Strengthening the position of the school in the local environment
 - care for the good name of the school, representing the interests of the entire school;

- enriching the school's offer, making school life more attractive;
 - promoting the school in a local environment, making others interested in it;
 - cooperation with institutions in the local environment (foundations, e.g. Food Bank, Polish Children and Youth Foundation, Fight Boredom, World at Your Fingertips; societies e.g. Towarzystwo Nasz Dom), associations e.g. Ochocianie, UNICEF, Together for Bielany, institutions e.g. kindergartens, workplaces, airports, universities, schools, orphanages, senior homes, shelters, cinemas, Blood Donation Center, culture centers, parish; district and city authorities and residents;
7. Provoking and making changes
- presenting own proposals for changes in school law;
 - impact on teaching programs, including extended programs;
 - preparing changes that will cover the next year of students, "laying the foundations for what will happen next";
 - consulting, e.g. change of school colors, pin design;
 - consulting students' rights;
 - consulting artistic events, environmental events, student events, e.g. access to classrooms, exemption from lessons, creating decorations, creating and servicing a school radio station, organizing trips;
 - proposing new rules for conducting student council elections
8. Teaching democracy
- running an election campaign;
 - building reflectiveness regarding social predispositions;
 - reporting initiatives;
 - evaluating school and teachers' work;
 - selection (or influence on the choice) of a student council supervisor and student ombudsman;
 - participation in the Youth District Council and the City Council of the Capital City of Warsaw, participation of students in the High School League, in which young people operate without adult supervision, implementing joint projects of student governments;
9. Implementation of shared responsibility
- co-deciding whether or not a student should be removed from the list of students;
 - participation in the decision on the scope of school-free days (after consulting the director);
 - making decisions about organizing various events;
 - issuing opinions on students selected for scholarships;
 - participation in the meetings of the teaching council;
10. Selecting leaders
- creating conditions to distinguish those "who appear at meetings and pretend to mean something" and those "who decide to get involved";
 - providing the opportunity to test yourself in the implementation of specific tasks;
 - strengthening such qualities as commitment, responsibility, creativity, communication skills, diligence, independence, efficiency, selflessness;
 - creating an atmosphere of prestige for people who are committed to the school community;
 - enabling you to build your experience and biography;
11. Shaping prosocial attitudes
- contributing to arousing empathy, social involvement, civic activity, responsibility, strengthen the sense of self-control and self-discipline as well as planning skills;
 - promoting valuable attitudes, including patriotism, ecological and sensitivity to the needs of others; as cooperation and help.

The planes mentioned above are not sharp enough in every school. Directors as well as supervisors and representatives of student councils notice many shortcomings that may indicate that in their facility in some aspects the student self-governance is experiencing a crisis.

The main difficulties of student self-governance include:

- involving more students (e.g. representatives of class three) and the local environment;
- finding a teacher who will want to help students implement a specific project, especially when it involves devoting extra time and work;

- lack of time of students themselves – student council work requires commitment, and with a large amount of education (including participation in the lessons, the need to write tests), the problem is to reconcile these two activities: learning and working in student council;
- the need to act under the law, and young people are not always aware of it;
- dealing with organizational aspects of the school (e.g. going out during classes to carry out their tasks);
- difficulty in reaching a compromise (sometimes students prefer to give up their ideas).

In addition, there are better and worse moments in the activities of student councils' representatives, sometimes "waviness and momentary breaks". Much depends on the period of the school year. Less activity is associated with the end of the semester, when students have to spend more time studying. What is more, the respondents perceive greater involvement among younger students, which is connected with the fact that some older students take up work and do not have time for additional tasks and duties at school.

Student council supervisors themselves notice that among student council representatives, the lack of specific personal predispositions often hinders or prevents their effectiveness. One of the respondents tells about this interestingly: "I have a very intelligent chairman of the student council, but he is neither reliable, nor dependable, unfortunately I can't count on him to do something himself". As the respondent goes on to say about her student, although he is brilliant, which helps during learning or meetings, it is not enough when you have to complete tasks at school. Therefore, the supervisor believes that this student is not suitable for the position of chairman of the student council. Student council, which does not work well, leads to the fact that after a year it is created in a new form; if everything works well, it lasts even until the final exams.

In some schools it is severe that only few people want to get involved in the work of student council, because it is aggravating and generates new responsibilities. Then only few people take additional activities. This problem is more pronounced in schools where there are many commuting students and students have limited time spent in school. The same is true in vocational schools where many students work and school activities are secondary to them. Also, in the face of choosing between extra-curricular activities and self-governance, the latter is less attractive. As a consequence, it happens that there are more ideas than the possibilities of their implementation, because students are not enough willing to help.

There are voices of adults that the specificity of modern youth is that they are reluctant to work and are reluctant to learn. It is difficult to encourage them to go to external meetings, even if they take place during lessons. One of the teachers even commented that she works with young people, who can be called "young pensioners" – she herself feels younger than her students. Her mentees are able to work on a task basis, but she has to set these tasks, inspire and suggest ideas, find means and ways to implement ideas. It happens that she even writes the student councils' chairman speech, because without her involvement or even doing it, the student council would not exist. Her task is even to monitor Facebook entries and correcting errors in what students have written. In turn, individual statements of students testify that representatives of student council would like to be appreciated, that they do not see any benefits from this work – they only have more responsibilities and must help others, they must stay after lessons; they have more stress and work, and less time. The saddest picture of student self-governance appeared in two student statements: "student council is a joke, a shiny toy thrown to students so that they feel that they mean something in this school" and "student council is a volunteering service that tries to entertain students, but in fact it has faint impact on school". These statements raise doubts as to whether a community is actually being built in these specific schools or whether it has entered a phase of deep crisis.

There were also signals in the statements about the growing role of new media in undertaking work in student council. One can even speak of a transfer of community to the level of virtual reality – the media are used not only for information, but even for the election of student council representatives. Meetings and face-to-face communication are being replaced by virtual solutions.

6. The discussion

Research has shown two faces of student self-governance. One of its dimensions is the "activator" of the entire community in which activities are undertaken for the benefit of the community, not only at school, but also in local community, in which the supervisor becomes a guide, and the pedagogical council supports students and contributes to their greater motivation in activities. The second face shows the student council in crisis.

It is a “frustrated helper”, who follows the guidelines of a director or supervisor, who has no strength or desire to encourage the school community to get involved.

Contemporary communities are created to carry out all human affairs, but they often have an ad-hoc nature, and are related to such matters that require quick response. Studies of student councils indicate some ad-hoc actions, which are associated with high dynamics of changes among representatives of the student councils (Szymański, 2016). On the other hand, a student council can turn into an institution “stuck in itself” (Kamiński, 1985, p. 244). The particular apparent activity of student councils concerns legal aspects – reluctance to introduce students to the school board, in particular the fear of receiving opinions on the work of teachers. “The real value of democracy is that power comes from the community, not from outside” (Śliwerski, 2013, p. 133). Research results show that students are able to manage their affairs, meet the different needs of students and protect their political interests. Student associations as organized forces had a much greater impact than students in general (Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999). Involvement in pro-social activities such as student council or volunteering involves positive educational trajectories and a low level of involvement in risky behavior. The identity of young people is formed through participation in peer associations and on the basis of undertaken activities (Eccles & Barber, 1999). The benefits associated with involvement in student council activity are a valuable experience for students, develop altruistic and pro-social attitudes and are bound with, among others, improved academic performance (Kuh & Lund, 1994). A positive approach is encouraged to engage students in student council activities, which results in the development of leadership skills, building effective interpersonal relationships, and acquiring the skills of constructive problem solving. (Keith, 2003). The role of the student council supervisor is non-negligible, because students work with him, learn from his experience and use it to help other students (Miles, 2011). There is a justified need for student council supervisors to encourage students to build an active school community, but also to have an insight into the internal dynamics of student self-governance, know the stressors affecting student council leaders and build relationships based on partnership, support and ethical behavior (Golden & Schwartz, 1994). The role of student council supervisors is difficult because they stand between students and teachers, at the same time being forced to be loyal to both these groups. Students learn by doing, so they should be helped but without manipulation. Sometimes failure plays an important educational and educational role. It should also be taken into account that there are legal regulations that determine the activities of student councils (Keith, 1972). Student councils are the first real experience of youth associated with independent organizational activities and have a positive impact on the political socialization of youth. Research indicates that American schools considered elite provide student councils with broader powers and control set at a lower level when poorer schools either do not care for student councils or let them to perform only social functions. Private religious schools promote student councils activity and give them the highest authority among other types of schools, but student councils’ decisions and membership are strictly controlled (McFarland, Starmanns, 2009).

The conclusions from previous research are therefore clear. Student council activities should be supported. Student council supervisors should be properly prepared and trained for their important role (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba, Romaniuk, 2019). Students should be made aware of the importance of social activity. It is also worth to activate parents and to use their potential to support the education of civic attitudes among young people.

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