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POSSIBLE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL REFORM: FROM “IVORY TOWER” TO “FLOWER TOWER”

Abstract

The article presents a brief case study of a project involving cooperation between secondary schools and Jagiellonian University. An evaluation of the project is presented in the context of tension between two alternative paradigms that describe relationship between schools and universities. The traditional approach seems to be built on the concept of influence, whereas one advocated by the Democratic School Reform emphasizes partnership. A parallel is drawn to alternative visions of relations between students and teachers, allowing to identify basic dimensions which differentiate the described approaches. These dimensions are then applied to evaluate the project.

Abstrakt

Artykuł zawiera studium przypadku projektu edukacyjnego opierającego się na współpracy między Uniwersytetem Jagiellońskim a szkołami średnimi. Autorzy dokonują ewaluacji projektu w wymiarach, które stanowią kryteria różnicujące pomiędzy dwoma paradygmatami: paradygmatem tradycyjnym oraz paradygmatem demokratycznym. Paradygmat tradycyjny oparty jest na zasadzie wpływu (wpływu uniwersytetu na szkoły, ale także nauczycieli na uczniów). Paradygmat demokratyczny, zgodny z wizją Demokratycznej Reformy Szkoły, podkreśla natomiast zasadę partnerstwa, zarówno w relacji uniwersytet – szkoły, jak i szkoła – uczniowie. Elementy oceny projektu przedstawionego w artykule pozwalają na odnalezienie w nim aspektów zarówno jednego, jak i drugiego paradygmatu.

The issue of nature of relationship between university and school seems to be too obvious and too close to our daily experience to gain our close attention and become a topic of closer examination. And sadly so, because the relationship that a university has with a school is interestingly far more complex and its social and cultural influence is far greater than in case of any other public institution.

One of the core issues that connects both institutions is an output cross-dependency that forms a long term feedback loop. University educates future school leaders and teachers that operate within the frame of knowledge and socially accepted trends that stem from the very same university. They, in turn, “produce” future university students, whose “quality” directly influences both intellectual potential and range of investigative pursuits of the university.

This continuous, several years long feedback loop may be familiar to many experienced academic leaders and teachers as a general reflection or a vague “feeling,” but is very difficult to describe or investigate empirically, in terms of systematic metrics and specific relations between gathered data. The reasons for the aforementioned difficulty seems twofold. Firstly, the long-term nature of the “feedback loop,” the organizational culture and climate variability between specific schools and universities, as well as many possible external influences attenuating empirical effects create important methodological obstacles that need to be considered before moving towards more specific and empirical approaches. Secondly – and more interestingly – it can be suggested that the nature of the research subject creates a unique situation. School, being one of the society’s most important public institutions, is a frequent object a university research. Nevertheless, very frequently it is construed as an external object and studied as separate from its examiner. On the other hand, turning attention towards the relation between school and university would require the university to construe itself as both actor and object of the analysis. Some of the questions that come to mind here can be asked from sociological perspective (*What are power and control relations in such research? Is there basis for conflict? Which side is allowed to define and evaluate meanings, propose research variables and comment on them?*). Other may stem from psychology (*Is the researcher a member of one of investigated groups? Is there danger of stereotypization of outgroup members while retaining full appreciation of the diversity within own group? Is there ground for basic attribution error – explaining own behavior by external influences and other actors’ behavior by their nature?*). Having considered these obstacles, it seems that one of the ways to avoid them or at least reduce their ill effects could be based on refraining from large scale, general investigations in favor of studying specific, narrow areas and events where specific universities and schools interact. Such approach has its obvious limitations (above all – generalization of conclusions), but allow for more external perspective and lesser variability within the examined area. The present work attempts to demonstrate a brief and initial example of this approach, beginning with a general and metaphorical vision of changes in relation between school and universities, and aiming to apply it in description and understanding of a specific project case.

In recent years, a new and very important aspect of the relation university-school became apparent. It stems directly from the world of a knowledge driven economy originated in Anglo-Saxon education centers. Universities become more and more involved in organizational learning consultancy where schools act as customers of their advice and training offers.

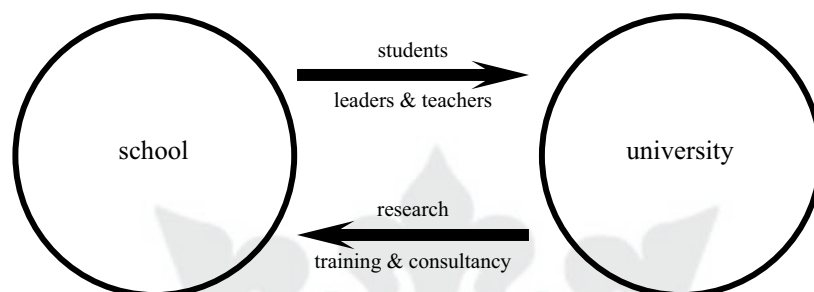


Fig. 1. Exchange between school and university

The structure of relations presented on Figure 1 suggests many possibilities for the university of exerting influence on school as an institution. There are a lot of examples of such connections within a general theme of either increasing quality of education.

One of such projects, the “Pearl Fishers” by Jagiellonian University, has been selected because of its close relation to the domain of formal education was selected for closer presentation, to demonstrate transferable practice as well as encountered obstacles.

The object of the “Pearl Fishers” project is encouragement of talented high school students to work intensively on their own development and to undertake further education at an academic level. The JUE inaugurated this project with the intention primarily of reaching those environments in which higher education is not an obvious choice and in which many young people do not even consider academic education.

The decision making of who should participate in the project has been transferred to Polish local governments. Each of 379 of them was invited to nominate 1–5 participants who correspond to the general participant’s profile: high intellectual potential endangered by socioeconomic difficulties and lack of support for educational ambitions in the closest environment. All nominated participants took part in a two-week summer school at the Jagiellonian University. The recruitment procedure, as well as summer school, took place two times up to date. In 2006 there have been total number of 43 participants. In 2007 the number increased to 96.

The 2007 program has been evaluated by its personnel in respect to sets of opposing values presented below:

Pearl Fishers			
Feudal	–	Democratic	+
Hierarchy	+	Teamwork	–
Exclusive	–	Inclusive	+
Detached	–	Embedded	+
Problems	–	Solutions	+
Lecture	–	Dialogue	+

The project was evaluated to be democratic because of large involvement of local governments. On the other hand it is not perceived as free of hierarchy. In order to be able to speak of true democracy in the project the team spirit would have to appear not only among the faculty and staff working on the project, but also among all the stakeholders involved.

In fact, the relationship between universities and schools almost always seems to be more about influence than equal partnership. Consequently, an idea of a literally equal partnership between universities and schools may come across as unconvincing – with the closest available analogy of the situation being the one of relations between a school teacher and his or her students. In this relationship a similar quality of influence and transfer can be found, as between “higher” and “lower” education institutions. The teacher is in possession of knowledge which easily puts him or her in the position of power, influencing social norms determining the attitudes of both sides of the exchange.

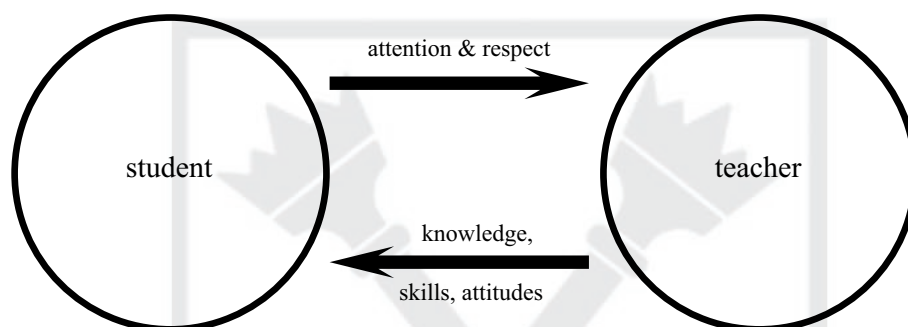


Fig. 2. Exchange between student and teacher

An important tension in public discourse regarding this area can be defined by a conflict between two different sets of norms and values associated with learning. One of them theoretically grounded in sociological functionalism, is very easy to apply to the situation described above. It stretches the importance of institutionalized socialization through which individuals are shaped to conform social norms. Learning can be then understood as “knowledge transfer,” i.e. passing on knowledge accumulated by former generations to students who are essentially receptive and passive. Such approach puts the society in the centre of attention as the main actor and beneficiary of the process. Within this paradigm a hierarchy emerges as a natural relationship between a student and a teacher, and also, moving back to the original discussion, between school and university.

The opposite side of the argument draws much more attention to a learning individual, who is given freedom to choose and apply available knowledge, as well as define and express him – or herself in relation to cultural heritage. This approach seems to be more suited to the reality of information-rich environments, where the teacher doesn’t have privileged access to sources of knowledge. In this vision, power relations are attenuated, with more potential space for attitudes con-

nected to partnership and mutual respect. School defined on its basis is closer to the idea of a “learning environment” created to offer different resources and support to individuals than an externally structured and goal directed institution.

Current relationship between the universities and the schools is deeply grounded in the former paradigm. As mentioned before, many powerful paths of influence, such as educating teachers and managers, providing consultancy or influencing policymakers through research and expert advice, lie at hand of the university for shaping the school without even having to listen to it. It seems fairly safe to suggest that universities to date resemble keepers of the *ancien regime* rather than vanguards of the revolution. The change of this attitude through engagement in Democratic School Reform can therefore be conceptualized as a way of “giving up the crown.” However, the power of the university to support schools in their way through Democratic School Reform remains for now an unused potential that can be realized only by the reform of the university itself and making its own organizational culture more open, flexible and democratic.

In Jagiellonian University vision of such change led to establishment of a new organizational unit – the Jagiellonian University Extension (JUE). Within this structure, the desired effect was metaphorically described as transition from described as transition from “Ivory Tower” to a “Flower Tower:”

Ivory Tower	Flower Tower
Feudal	Democratic
Hierarchy	Teamwork
Exclusive	Inclusive
Detached	Embedded
Problems	Solutions
Lecture	Dialogue

It was agreed that introducing significant change in the Jagiellonian University’s organizational culture is likely to be a long and gradual process. The first step to set it in motion was building some of university’s actions around the “learners”/“customers” needs, rather than particular domains of knowledge. For contemporary business organizations this shift of attention could not be considered a breakthrough, but for the traditional structures of the university – it really was. Introducing a learner/client oriented approach to everyday practice of the JUE meant developing and testing different services, projects and models of co-operation that begin from identifying needs of potential customer or beneficiary, and match them with university’s knowledge potential treated primarily as a set of tools and resources for available to satisfy them.

This short document aimed to outline some key points pertaining to the complex relation between a university and a school. The authors hope that these thoughts could add to a much needed and timely discussion about the paradigms of education in the contemporary society.