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## **ON DEMOCRATIZATION AND SELF-GOVERNANCE – A SOCIO-PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the contemporary world, democracy is the goal of millions of people around the globe wanting to make a fair and lawful country real. Democracy and communization are terms used by members of many scientific disciplines. We have looked at them from a pedagogical perspective, mainly focusing on the school environment and the meaning of self-government in the process of socialisation of the young generation and building an open and responsible society. In the following article we try to define two terms key for pedagogy: democratisation of school and school self-governance.

### **2. DEMOCRATIZATION OF SCHOOL**

According to numerous people, not only thinkers, but also citizens who are supporters of the democratic system as a form of government, democratic values should be transferred and used not only in political relations but also in other areas of community life. Only the implementation of this task will allow for the building of a fully democratic society which is an ideal for many. Anthony Giddens says that the “crisis of democracy comes from the fact that it is not democratic enough” (Giddens, 1999, p. 66) and shows a way to battle this crisis by “democratising democracy” (Giddens, 1999, p. 65; Giddens, 2001, p. 25). This process is intended to be an extension and a supplement of democracy as part of all the other social relations, also those which are not of the political system. Only a fully democratized society may shape democratic politics. Beyond politics true democracy

should appear in different linked and interconnected aspects and areas of everyday life. Democratization processes should relate to each area of social life, especially private areas and family and neighbourly relations as well as – which seems obvious and is the subject of this article – the school environment.

The changes which were implemented in the educational system after 1989, based on the adopted directions of democratization, were mostly linked to the decentralization of power at the local level, empowerment and activation of all educational entities in order to work for a common good (Zahorska, 2007, p. 99). This led to the fact that the idea of the communization of the educational system was at first realised only by the self-governance of teachers, parents and students, as well as the school autonomy as a community of teachers, students and parents (Salomowicz, 1989, p. 100; see also Radziewicz, 1989). Then the educational system act from the 7th of September 1991 (Journal of Laws no. 2016, item 1943 with changes) allowed for the grass-root, social contribution of citizens in the exercise of authority and control in schools by creating school councils and their field structures (Śliwerski, 2013).

Sociological sources show the concept of communization as a synonym of socialization understood initially as the development of the social nature or character of people in mutual relationships (Miller, 2002, p. 42). Sociologists try, among other, to answer the questions regarding the duration of socialisation, its interactive nature and expected result among members of society. The process of socialization supported by bringing up leads ultimately to the communization of the individual.

Pedagogy draws on the legacy of sociology but does not treat the socialization and communization of the individual as the same thing. Socialisation is a multilateral process enabling an individual to gradually become a member of society on which the individual acts for the benefit of others and is committed to the general good as part of personal good (Okoń, 2007, pp. 377, 447). This means that through socialization the individual acquires a system of values, norms and patterns of behaviour which are standard in the given society (Kupisiewicz, Kupisiewicz, 2009, p. 63).

Literature on the subject also has the concept of communization of the school/educational system understood as the deetatization (the country falling back from directly doing business, individualization and privatisation), decentralization of power (transfer of responsibility for the execution of the

tasks to the local and regional level) and democratisation of interpersonal relationships. In other words, this is about the minimising of the influence of the public administration on schools by increasing the access of different groups to the educational system (Gęsicki, 2001). Communization of schools is described as part of political and educational thinking, as a way for the citizens to have grassroots control over educational institutions, participation in the management, influencing the educational process as well the creating reform ideas (Milerski, Śliwerski, 2000, p. 263; see Śliwerski, 2017). Communization of schools is understood as the introduction self-governance mechanisms into the school, realization of empowerment rules by all educational entities and a relationship with the local environment. Various projects of communized schools point to the openness of the educational resources used (Winiarski, 2000, p. 53). For Bogusław Śliwerski communization is a “gradable characteristic of the school communities reflecting the appointment (...) of a school council or another social body with the same responsibilities as the parent’s council which has the ability (conditions) for the execution of the statutory aims and tasks as part of participating in the co-management of the school” (Śliwerski, 2013, p. 174). This definition has an institutional characteristic – the school council as a representation of teachers, students and parents. In turn, according to Stefan Kwiatkowski, communization is a direct consequence of the decentralisation (understood as the participation of local communities in making decisions regarding local educational institutions) and democratisation of management (Kwiatkowski, 2008, p. 49–50). However, as it is rightly pointed out by Bogusław Śliwerski, usually democratization leads to decentralization, but it is wrongly equated with a lowering of competences. “In a democratic society decentralisation of the administration consists of a transfer of responsibility for the implementation of public tasks to executive entities different than the educational authorities” (Śliwerski, 2002, p. 12).

Democratization means working toward egalitarianism, a fight against traditions, a natural order values, the elites and co-deciding of everyone for everyone and a total politicisation of life (Zwoliński, 2010, p. 11). Generating democracy using negotiations, participation and agreement as well as reducing differences without violence are at the essence of the processes of democratisation (Huntington, 2009). Democracy needs a balance between freedom, equality and partnership and the duty and responsibility

for a diverse interest of the individual and community (Pilch, 2010, p. 82). Polish literature of the subject usually follows up the concept of democratisation with the concept of communization of schools, which is seen as a democratic correlate of the culture of school (Ernst-Milerska, 2015, p. 116). Communization and democratization of education are treated interchangeably (Mencel, 2009, p. 23). For example, Śliwerski (2013) names democratization of school as grassroots communization movement.

An attempt at the conceptualization of the democratization of school has been undertaken by Mencel who understands it as “the governing of a school by teachers, students and parents for teachers, students and parents by the teachers, students and parents thanks to the creation of a school council” (Mencel, 2009, pp. 36–37). This definition is in unison with what Śliwerski (2013, p. 386) writes about a communized school with the difference that Mencel, following Dahl, adds procedural minima of modern democracy to the definition of democratisation (so democratization also means procedures).

Śliwerski (2017, pp. 169–173), by modifying Arnstein’s citizen participation ladder (2012), rightly proposes to use it to analyse the degree of school democratisation in the educational policy. In the case of education, the first level of participation (or rather lack of thereof) would include the inability to embrace the subjects of education in different decisions (manipulations) and shaping the subject of education in the direction of the symbolic violence, a hidden schooling program and socio-cultural reproduction. The second level of participation would cover the simulated actions of the authorities against the subjects of education which would inform about the action taken (information) and allows for the expression of opinion by the subjects of education but would not incorporate them in the decision-making process if they are different than the vision of the changes (consultations) and would rather seek applause for reforms coming from above (appeasement). On the third level of participation, democratisation is linked with a partnership/cooperation (it is about being open to dialogue and common goals when it comes to bringing up, educating and care), delegating real decisions or prerogatives as well as civic control which would enable a realistic assessment of the level of the realisation of goals and tasks. So true, not pretended democratisation is only at the third level of participation, which is described as the communization of authority (Śliwerski, 2017, p. 172).

It should also be pointed out that although communization of school appears in the Polish tradition (among other: Radziewicz, 1989; Śliwerski, 1996, 2009, 2013; Szymański, 2014; Turnowiecki, 1995; Uryga, 2014; Śliwerski, 2013), Anglo-Saxon and Germanic traditions, is linked with democratization (Ernst-Milerska, 2015; Milerski, 2015, p. 44). Communization of school does not exist in the West as a concept. The German term “Vergesellschaftung” and the English “communization” appear mostly in economic and political contexts and not pedagogical ones (Ernst-Milerska, 2015, p. 116).

The issues of self-government and democratization of school, according to Bogusław Śliwerski, a researcher of educational policy in Poland, are amongst the most important areas of educational conflicts which happen between the main political forces. The democratization of schools and the mechanisms leading to its implementation are one of the more important axes of ideological conflict in modern Poland. This author, based on his own observations, analysis of political programs and empirical studies, shows differences in the approach to the communizing of public education between the three most popular ideologies. The right-wing points to school councils with a dominant parent role as an institutional solution leading to greater democratization. The left-wing acts similarly but it would like to see the school authorities (principals and teachers) as superior to the rest. According to the supporters of both ideologies, schools should operate with a limited or no influence of the students. On the other hand, liberals define the school as a community where all interested parties (parents, students and school authorities) cooperate and play equal roles in the decision-making processes (Śliwerski, 2015, p. 428).

### 3. SCHOOL SELF-GOVERNANCE – A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The literature of the subject has many descriptions of the essence of self-government. Self-governance can be equated with the pedagogical idea, formal organisation, cooperation rule or a method of pedagogical interaction (Pilch, 2006, p. 641). Self-government is most usually understood as a form of institutionalised collective action. For example, the student council is a “association of the students of the school, created in order to solve task related to the student’s school life” (Okoń, 2007, p. 366). Other institutions operating in school environments are also discussed. “In modern

schools the following instances can have influence on the process of communizing: parent council, student council, pedagogical council and school council” (Śliwerski, 2002, p. 11). The school council is a special institution which enables cooperation between all interested parties: parents, students and teachers (Gozdowska, Uryga, 2014, p. 58). That is why this authority should be treated as the most democratic, giving all parties equal rights and guaranteeing influence on the school’s everyday operation. The other bodies are formed by members of only one of the groups. Some even say that the school council is the last hope for democracy (Mencel, 2009, p. 51). This is because of the lack of student interest in social issues, no will to engage in school life and an atrophy of student self-government. At the same time, it is believed that the current formula of the parent council and pedagogical councils is anachronistic and does not correspond to the contemporary challenges faced by the school environment.

This narrow, limited to an institutional dimension, understanding of self-government may lead to the omission of the pedagogical functions and minimising of educational qualities. As Aleksander Kamiński wrote “self-government is also an educational method” (Kamiński, 1985, p. 17). In this context the numerous benefits of enabling students for self-governing are underlined: an increase in the feeling of freedom and personal dignity, giving students a greater sense of security, creation of a sense of equal rights, creation of intra-group standards, taking responsibility, increase in independent thinking, mutual cooperation and interaction, helping each other, implementation of the ideas of democratic partnership and selecting leaders in a natural selection process (Radziewicz, Mirgos, 1988, p. 20–21). The ability to empower the student and support their autonomy is considered the key benefit of the introduction of the practice of self-government. These values are identified by many schools and pedagogical theories as the fundamental objectives of education. What is more, “self-government is often determined as an expression of the subjectivity of the individual (or the other way round)” (Popławska, 2001, p. 24). The idea of student self-government is unquestionably “integral to the development of the modern school, with striving for student activity and basing the teaching and education press on its active interests (Wroczyński, 1968, p. 94).

Pedagogical studies have been interested in self-governance for many years, especially – as has been stated above – by focusing on the importance of a formal organization, the student council. The first Polish research was



carried out in the 1920s by Rudolf Taubenszlag. This philosopher pondered over the content and meaning of the student council. He pointed to many forms of the council, showing the possible interpretations: school country, a school commune, a school cooperative, school self-help, school family or a school monastery (Taubenszlag, 1931, pp. 8–15).

Even practising self-government has a rich tradition in Poland, reaching back to the times of National Education Committee. In the 1930s solutions adopted in Poland were appreciated outside of our country. The Director of the International Office of the Schools said at that point: “Poland, as far as I know, is a country which was the first to understand and apply the student council system (as in: Newerly, Kamiński, Żelazko 1962, p. 7). These words were called upon by Igor Newerly, a close friend of Janusz Korczak, one of the most prominent promoters of the idea of self-government among children and adolescents. The name of the “Old Doctor” is unmistakably linked with the main educational idea implemented in his establishments. The Korczak council was not only a student institution but most of all a “form of social action of children and adolescents” (Ziółkowski, 2014, p. 20). Korczak wrote that “self-government is the real work for the equal good of all who work together, study together and spend half of day together, so that one does not hurt the other, does not disturb, laugh at, on the contrary – to give favours, help, care for and keep order” (Korczak, 1978, p. 208). The idealistic approach of Janusz Korczak to the upbringing of children was based on a deep faith in the possibility to create suitable norms and rules by the students themselves. Korczak believed that educational methods leading to the attainment of values like: responsibility, solidarity or children’s empowerment, will provide for the success of his project. He wanted the youth to co-rule and co-host in both of the educational care establishments he ran. In order to do this he created three instances of self-government: a peer court, a parliament council and a children parliament. Peer courts protected children from injustice on the hand of the educators. The parliamentary (self-government) council created the rules and norms which applied to all residents. After some years a parliament was also created to approve the acts proposed by the councils (Szymański, 2003, pp. 20–24). Also, the ideological concepts of Korczak’s successors were full of faith in the youthful self-government (see more concepts of school self-government in: Śliwerski, 2017, pp. 123–157).

#### 4. ON THE NEED FOR DEMOCRATIZATION OF SCHOOL LIFE – THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATIONS

The idea of a democratic education (in democracy for democracy) was formulated by Dewey (2005a, 2005b), who started collective research of social and scientific issues. According to him, democracy and education are two overlapping aspects of social life. Democracy is a way of life created and reworked by every generation. By proposing the idea of learning through doing and group cooperation, Dewey creates reasons for the democratic rules to function on school education. Cooperation of individuals for the common good meshes the individual aspect of education with the social one, the socialising and emancipatory functions (Rorty, 1993, p. 97). At the same time, it promotes the democratisation of school and as a result – the democratisation of society. The degree of the democratisation of society depends on the extent to which the social structure is based on the use of specific and variable characteristics of individuals (Dewey, 2005a). In practice this means the need to see the school class as a miniature of society and to focus on the social aspect of learning (Dewey, 2005a, p. 18).

Bruner also stresses the importance of the cooperation of everyone taking part in the educational process for the growth of democracy. Mutual interactions of man and the environment are constantly reconstructed, they “become unfinished”. This implies looking at education in the context of a socio-cultural issue and linking with empowerment, cooperation and reflectiveness (see Dudzikowa, Jaskulska, Wawrzyniak-Besztereda, Bochno, Bochno, Knasiecka-Falbierska, 2011, pp. 62–63). Thanks to cooperation and the natural activity of the mind we take part in dialogue and discourse with others, we get the ability to reflect upon the actions of the group (Bruner, 2006, p. 9). Such *praxis* – according to Bruner (2006, p. 138) – increases awareness and this in turn increases diversity. Cooperation should be combined with empowerment so with an increase of the commitment when it comes to one’s own mental activity. The idea sees the mind as “proactive, problem-oriented, focused, selective, constructive and set on the end result” (Bruner 2006, p. 133). Experiencing oneself as the cause entails independent initiative and the execution of the action (see Dudzikowa, 2011, p. 62). It also implies having the abilities and practical knowledge (Bruner, 2006, p. 60). School should be the provider of empowerment and should be an environment conclusive to the activity of educational entities



(Bruner, 2006, p. 62). This in turn leads to participating in compulsory and extracurricular projects, to giving more responsibility to entities in order to achieve goals linked to the functioning of the school. Undoubtedly the “community of learner” contributes to building of democracy in school but according to Bruner (2006, p. 63) in many democratic cultures we have focused on the formal criteria of “doing something” and the bureaucratic requirements put forth for education, while forgetting about its subjective aspect. Meanwhile in educational situations which have space for reflection, learning is treated as the perception of sense and understanding of the world. Understanding “enriches the mind”, creates the possibility for multiple interpretations staying careful and rigour which transmits meanings of a manifold. Keeping up democracy by means of debate, negotiation and cooperation is a challenge for education (Bruner, 2006, pp. 138–140). This is because school shows the problems of modern civilisation as in a lens (see Dudzikowa et al., 2011).

The idea of democratization can also be found in left-wing critical theory, created in the 1930s as part of the Frankfurt School, related to the Institute for Social Research (McLaren, 2015, p. 222). Critical theory is a theory of the practice of social life, ideologically aware and sure that no theory in social science will ever be objective and neutral, it will also in some part reflect the ideological interests of social groups which gave birth to it. Therefore, representatives of critical theory directly express their ideological interest – a realisation of a leftist, democratic, pluralistic and financially egalitarian society which recognizes the right to speak of every individual and social group. In this sense critical theory overcomes the division into dominating and satellite groups and cultures. Critical theory thus becomes an element of social change and the political project (Milerski, Karwowski, 2016, p. 34). The goal of critical theory is an ideological, critical analysis of theory in social studies from the perspective of the ideological interests expressed in them as well as developing its own concept of society for which the society as a communicational community is a theoretical model. Critical theory sees the need of practical involvement of the school in social change and the educational processes occurring in it and outside of it (see Kwieciński, 2000, p. 23; Witkowski, 1988). Its foundations (as in the case of Dewey’s pragmatism) are referred to by critical pedagogy, which put forwards the task (in addition to the purely theoretical goals) the transformation of schools and the whole society,

the emancipation and empowerment of every individual and social group which cannot separate from the society but only through social participation (Milerski, Karwowski, 2016, p. 29). In other words, it is about „such a change of schools and models of pedagogical action which would enable the teachers and students to have the critical power of actively questioning and negotiating relations between theory and practice, analysis and common sense as well as learning and social change” (Guilherme, 2006, p. 167). So we do not only teach critical thinking but also see that our action can change the world (McLaren, 2015, p. 53).

By referring to the Habermas’ theory of communicational actions, critical pedagogues see shaping communicational competences – dialogue with a change to influence policy, negotiations and agreement as well as the ability to articulate and express one’s views and beliefs – as basic educational competences which allow individual to question the *status quo* (Giroux, 1993). This means that every individual must have the right and ability to participate in the social discourse. This is the practical goal – emancipation which aims to show the difference between reality and possibility of the emergence of educational processes. Not only cognition is crucial but also practice. Knowledge is a social construct, entangled in history and thus becoming an object of political struggle (Milerski, Karwowski, 2016, p. 34).

Critical pedagogues treat school as a form of social life which should shape the skills to think and act, to critically assess and ask questions (Witkowski, 2010). Therefore, the goal of the school is true participation in the political fight for the renewal of the society, for making the youth aware of its rights as well as its moral, economic and civil duties (Guttek, 2007, p. 331). School is a public service in the nation’s life, which give a change for social involvement and fight for democracy which is not given in advance (Witkowski, 2010, p. 330). That is why it (school) should educate citizens to actively and collectively work on the public scene, to be a subject capable of understanding the limitations of one’s own ideological engagements (Giroux, McLaren, 1986, p. 221). Educating for democracy happens not only in school but also in many educational concepts, like: culture of the screen, pop culture, “new media”. Thereby school is a factor of social change which makes it possible for an individual to fully and democratically take part in social and public life, in which resistance and opposition to ideology stand against violence and dominance of ideology

(Szkudlarek, Śliwerski, 2000, p. 25). Similarly to Dewey (1963), Giroux (1993) proposes a pedagogical and political vision of democratic society as a result of education in a democratic school.

In the context of the above considerations it needs to be underlined that functioning in democracy (in school life and broader society) is linked with the idea of the common good, which is based on the good of the whole community and the individuals who create it (Milerski, 2015, p. 48). Self-governance and democracy, according to Bogusław Śliwerski (2017, p. 11), are only possible in environments which take action for the common good and interests. "(...) Democracy cannot be reduced to formal procedures for expressing your opinion but it must be based on ethical foundations of civic life, on human right and in light of our arguments – on the ethos of common life. Balancing various interests – of the majority and the minority – is at the heart of this ethos. Thereby the common good presupposes the existence of an inclusive and not exclusive mentality. This cannot be guaranteed by law, by a meticulous set of legal acts. Making common good is primarily an ethical foundation and is linked to a way of understanding with a specific way of seeing oneself and the world with a specific moral sensitivity" (Milerski, 2015, p. 51).

From the perspective of neopragmatism and critical pedagogy, school, although it should not, serves mainly for cultural reproduction, it is political in essence and entangled in knowledge/authority relations (see Śliwerski, 2015). School should bring to light the hidden interests and forms of ruling (for example social relations in class, the hidden school curriculum, student selection methods). That is why a focus on passivity and obedience makes the democratisation of school life, and the same time active participation in a democratic society, impossible.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Democracy is not only dependent on the structures, institutions and political elites but also, or most of all, on the "quality" of citizens, their attitudes and skills. Mutual respect, solidarity, working for others and the common good are extremely important in order for the society of the future to implement the rules and standards of the lawful and democratic country. "Involved citizenship is not valued by young Poles. Its advantages are clear to students who feel they can shape school reality

together with their colleagues. (...) the patterns remain visible: the feeling of empowerment, the belief that school can be influenced by group student action, fosters the feeling of appreciation of the civic engagement of citizens. Positive experiences of self-government democratisation seem to be key, as they can influence how students feel and what will they do after obtaining public rights (Kosela, 2004, p. 230). That is why it is so important to make real the effective education leading to respect and nurturing of goals and democratic ideas in the life of each community. Unfortunately, the ideas and statements of many groups involved in the fight for the democratic school are quite far from the reality and practice of education. "Meanwhile in the modern Polish school system voracious political centrism is rampant (...). The inhibition and systematic degradation of the communizing of the school system, its democratization and the strengthening of centralism are nothing more but a desperate post-socialist attempt at keeping the ability to manipulate educational environments" (Śliwerski, 2017, pp. 220–221).

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## SUMMARY

The article aims to systematise the concepts of self-governance and democratisation. This paper presents the terminological findings and different approaches to the issues of democratisation and communization. It points

to the differing traditions of both concepts and the equivocalness and multi-directionality of thinking about democracy in school from the perspective of various educational theories. The authors also underline the long tradition of self-government in Polish schools, stressing its pedagogic aspect. In the last part of the article a theoretical justification of the democratization of school life has been undertaken.

**Key words:** democracy, communization, democratization, school, self-governance.