Autonomy, Collaboration and Competition: The Impact of Education Management Reforms which Aim to Increase School Autonomy on Relations between Schools

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Abstract

In recent decades, the neoliberal education policy has been implemented in many countries, by reducing the state's role in education management. Lithuania is one of the countries which after the restoration of Independence in 1991 and collapse of the Soviet Union has decentralized its education management system by giving more autonomy to schools and local authorities. Education-management reforms, which have already been implemented or are currently being implemented in response to social, economic and political changes in the country, have an impact on relationships between schools. **Purpose:** This article reports the findings of a study which reviewed education management reforms aimed at increasing school autonomy and their impact on inter-school collaboration and competition. **Research Method:** This study employs a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews. Twenty-four elementary and secondary school principals from different regions of Lithuania were interviewed. **Findings:** The results reveal that a significant influence on relations between schools comes from government decisions which relate to school autonomy, school choice, allocation of funds, school ranking, and the like. **Implications:** This study generates discussions on the impact of the education management reforms which aim to enhance school autonomy on inter-school relationships. In order to answer that question, a theoretical model of research was developed, including the theoretical basis of school autonomy, collaboration and competition, as well as the characteristics of Lithuanian education governance.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the neoliberal education policy implemented in many countries, by reducing the state's role in education management, has promoted greater school autonomy and provided competitive conditions within the education market. Although school autonomization or decentralization reforms are under way, there is insufficient evidence which would lead us to conclude that there is a direct link between the level of school autonomy and pupils' academic achievements (Maag Merki and Steinert 2006; Wößmann et al. 2007; Keddie 2016). As pointed out by the researchers, this could be due to the fact that there is far too little attention paid to schools in the process of shaping their autonomous managerial capacity (Malen et al. 1990; Wößmann 2005; Honig and Rainay 2012; Holmes et al. 2013). Hallinger and Snidvongs (2005) argue that school leadership skills have a direct impact on the implemented reforms. In this context, collaboration between schools can be seen as one of the measures for the development of school management and leadership. However, in many countries of the world, New Public Management (further: NPM), based on the neo-liberal ideology, does not support collaboration initiatives, as it is based on the view that the consumer of education services, who is given freedom of choice and diversity, encourages education providers to compete with each other. On the one hand, such an environment encourages schools to strive for higher overall quality, but also leads to the fact that schools become more isolated: principals do not share good practice, do not consult each other and do not share the infrastructure, etc. This can also lead to a decrease in pupil achievement, because a lack of collaboration between schools can fragmentize the educational process and increase the gap between the phases of schooling, i.e. risk periods during which a pupil moves from one phase of schooling to another or from one school to another (Monkevičius and Urbanovič 2016). In this context of New Governance, initiatives of education community partnerships would consistently develop the school collaboration model and encourage schools to share their existing best practices with other school communities.

In this article, **we examine the impact of the education management reforms, which aim to enhance school autonomy, on inter-school relationships.** We will base this on the case study of Lithuania, which we will disclose, what encourages schools to collaborate and what factors determine inter-school competition; when school collaboration or competition serves to improve school performance, and when it brings harm.

The article is structured in five sections. The first section outlines the concept of school autonomy, theoretical aspects of school collaboration and competition and recent trends in Lithuanian education management reforms. The second section presents the methodological considerations that guided the interview study and the analysis of the empirical data. The third section presents the findings, drawing on semi-structured interviews with head teachers of Lithuanian general education schools. The fourth chapter presents a data analysis. The article concludes with a discussion and conclusions.

Theoretical framework

The models of education management reforms aimed at increasing school autonomy

As mentioned above, one of the education management reforms in recent decades has been decentralization, with the consequent increasing of the autonomy of schools. This has led to more managerial functions and the transfer of decision-making power to the school level, development of school self-regulation, and the like (Caldwell and Spinks 2013; Cheng and Tai Hoi Lee 2016). Education-management reforms which aim to increase school autonomy reform grant greater freedom to principals, teachers, parents, and sometimes students or other members of the school community with regard to matters of teaching, finance, staffing and resourcing. Research (World Bank 2007; Hanushek et al. 2013; Gobby 2013; Keddie 2016) suggests that an increase of school autonomy can create the conditions for school leaders to respond better to the needs of their schools; to remove the supposed inefficiencies associated with bureaucratic governance; and to promote innovation and resource efficiency with the aim of improving the public education system overall.

It is noteworthy that school autonomy is not the same everywhere: in different countries, schools have been granted the decision-making right to different extents and in different areas (Daun 2010; Altrichter et al. 2014). Depending on the context, the education system can be decentralized in one area, but centralized in another (Karlsen 2000). For instance, the degree of autonomy in schools of the same country may vary depending on the principles of education management in the region and the extent to which the school is ready to be autonomous. Although there are many types of school autonomy throughout the world, they can be characterized by several general features: the aim of school autonomization reforms (political aspirations), the entity that the decision-making authority belongs to (structural autonomy), and the degree of the decision-making freedom given to schools in a specific activity (functional autonomy).

In the context of this study, it is important to reveal the political aspirations of the increasing school autonomy. It is noteworthy that, according to the same

ideology, education-management reforms which aim to increase school autonomy can be pursued for different purposes. Altrichter and Rürup (2010) distinguish three models of school autonomy: competition, participation and optimization. The competition model (more specific to centre-right governments) focuses on promoting quality, innovation and enabling schools to strategically position themselves as a service provider, which often means increasing opportunities for schools to have more choices. The participation model (more typical of the centre-left governments) primarily aims to democratize decision-making in schools by involving and empowering local stakeholders. Meanwhile, the optimization model aims to improve educational processes and results by decentralizing resources and responsibilities for pragmatic rather than ideological purposes.

Research shows that one of the key factors of successful implementation of school autonomy is management capacity at the school level (Urbanovič 2011; Urbanovič and Navickaitė 2016). One of the ways of increasing self-management capacity is school collaboration (Chapman 2015), which encourages them to share best practices and available resources.

School collaboration

Recently interest in reforming leadership and governance arrangements to promote school-to-school collaboration can be noted across several education systems (Chapman 2015). Collaboration is viewed on a scale from informal to formal (Jones 2009). Christopher Chapman, who analyzed school federations and chains in England (2013; 2015), says that many countries, including the United States, Sweden and England, have continued to experiment with new approaches involving independent state-funded schools (ISFSs), such as academies, charter schools and free schools, and it has been argued that these types of schools naturally lend themselves to the development of groups of schools working together as federations and chains under a single governance structure. However, he observes that "the evidence pertaining to the extent to which these reforms promote collaboration or have impact on student outcomes remains contested" (Chapman 2015, 46). Lindsay et al. (2007) reported that there was no evidence of any improvement in student outcomes in federated schools over and above that of non-federated comparative schools. However, a more recent study (Chapman et al. 2009) involving multi-level modelling techniques found that, although there "appeared to be little statistical difference between some types of federations and comparator schools, performance federations – where a higher and lower achieving school had been federated – showed the most positive impact on student outcomes" (Chapman 2015). England's school inspection agency (Ofsted 2011) also noted benefits for students in terms of expanded opportunities to meet students from other schools and to make new friends, with consequent increases in pupil confidence.

Research indicates that collaboration between schools "eased transition across different phases of schooling by adopting common approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that enable the receiving school to tailor its provision for new pupils more effectively" (Chapman 2015, 54). School teachers work together to design writing and response activities using social networking to enhance students' writing and collaboration skills (Phegley and Oxford 2010). Collaboration has significant benefits especially for rural primary schools (Williams 2008; Todman et al. 2009) and small schools (Jones 2009). "For principals of small primary schools, one of the big challenges is to stay in touch with the wider educational field. They are aware of the relative isolation of small schools and most desire to be part of the bigger picture – a community of schools. This can paradoxically increase the sense of autonomy where a cluster of schools is able to promote the region's special identity, supporting each other rather than competing" (Jones 2009, 153). Collaboration "facilitates the pooling of both financial resources and leadership capacity to improve and extend provision" (Chapman 2015, 54).

Thus, we see that school collaboration is an effective means of improving school performance, and, therefore, it is meaningful to promote and support inter-school collaboration to be able to increase school autonomy.

Competition between schools: pros and cons

Market-based reforms, based on the NPM ideology, promote competitive relations between schools by increasing parents' choices. Greater choice encourages parents and pupils to decide upon the type of schooling they favour and the particular school of the favoured type that best suits their perceived educational needs (Adnett and Davies 2000, 160). Therefore, it is argued that increasing the role of market forces will encourage curriculum innovation and diversity. Previous scientific research reveals that "increasing consumers power to exercise exit and voice enables parents and students to effectively determine the curriculum and the resulting product differentiation and diversity are the hallmarks of the dynamics of competition" (Tooley 1993, 37). It is also argued that schools, which seek efficiency and a competitive advantage, are encouraged to introduce innovations. However, recent research shows that competitive markets do not necessarily encourage diversity and innovation. "Indeed the interaction of atypical marginal consumers, transaction costs, information externalities and government regulations may cause increased competition to initially encourage greater curriculum conformity" (Adnett and Davies 2000, 165).

Levin and Fullan (2008) have criticized the approach on choice and competition as the drivers of school improvement. In their view, changing structures such as governance and accountability do not yield better results for students. In addition, research shows that school choice, while stimulating competition between schools, also promotes their inflation of assessment. Schools want to be attractive for students and thus reduce the level of requirements (Walsh 2010). Taking into

account these critical issues, it is worth mentioning the "whole system" approach of Levin and Fullan (2008, 291), in which "The heart of improvement lies in changing teaching and learning practices in thousands and thousands of classrooms, and this requires focused and sustained effort by all parts of the education system and its partners." A key element of this is an emphasis on capacity building to promote shared knowledge and understanding (Glatter 2012).

Education management reforms in Lithuania

In many countries the previously dominant bureaucratic model has been challenged by the New Public Management model which strives to minimize the impact of the state, decentralize the system, and encourage the formation of markets or qua-si-markets in education. Recent criticism of NPM made a search for alternative governance models necessary. For example, the New Governance model puts emphasis on a pluralistic approach to the state and the public sector, highlighting that the provision of public services and the public-policy implementation process is multi-faceted and involves many different entities. The result of contemporary public governance trends is that "diversity of schools is accompanied by an emerging diversity of governance – an intermingling of hierarchical governance (directions and controls from central government, as well as within chains), self-governance (autonomy, and also market pressures), co-governance (networks and collaborations) and democratic governance" (Woods and Simkins 2014, 328). Such a hybrid or mixed governance model is particularly characteristic of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where the scale and directions of change over the 1990s differed significantly from the consistent and gradual education reforms of the Western countries. Post-communist countries, including Lithuania, had to re-model and create a new concept of education goals and tasks, structures, educational content, methods and strategies within one decade. An assessment of the education-management reforms pursued by Lithuania after the restoration of Independence reveals that modern elements of public governance were introduced at certain moments, but the choice was often random or determined by external pressure.

An important factor which has had an impact on education-management reforms and relations between schools in Lithuania is the decrease in the number of pupils. From 2000 to 2014 the number of school-age children in Lithuania dropped by 259 thousand (43 per cent); thus municipalities were forced to restructure school networks, i.e. to close small schools and organize the transportation of pupils to the nearest other schools. These changes also determine the change in relations between schools, increasing pessimism within school communities.

It can be argued that the model of Lithuanian education-system governance is dominated by the elements of bureaucratic education governance, since in the current Lithuanian education system many powers are still concentrated at the central level of education governance: the national level not only shapes the educational

policy, but also provides rules on how political decisions should be implemented and controls adhesion to the rules (Urbanovič and Navickaitė 2016). However, it should be noted that the model of Lithuanian education-system governance features some elements of post-bureaucratic education governance. For example, the legislation entrenches several elements characteristic of the market governance model: school funding based on the principle "money follows a client" (so-called "pupil's basket") (competitive conditions); the possibility for pupils to choose the educational program and the educational institution (possibility to choose); the state's commitment to establish quality standards, monitor the activities of schools, and ensure the publicity of reports on the quality of education; schools are required to publish external evaluation reports of their activities (public access to information); the basis for remote governance is being developed. However, some of the principles characteristic of the market-governance model function only partially, as state institutions (municipalities) adjust the competitive environment by redistributing pupils' basket money or by optimizing the network of educational institutions. Besides, the possibility to choose the school is reduced by the principle of territorial distribution provided for by the law: the Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania provides for priority admission to a general-education school to a person living in the service territory assigned to that school by the institution exercising the rights and duties of the school (Article 29 (3)).

In recent years, the principles of democratic education governance have been increasingly emphasized in Lithuania: involvement of the society into the school activity, participation of stakeholders in decision-making, and strengthening of school autonomy. After the restoration of Independence, school autonomy in Lithuania has gradually increased, faster changes began with the adoption of provisions of the State Education Strategies (2003–2012 and 2013–2022), which provided for decentralization of education in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. Although comparative studies (e.g. Eurydice 2007) show that Lithuanian schools are quite autonomous in comparison to schools in other countries, in some areas, however, they lack autonomy. Often, school principals complain about lack of independence, especially in the area of financial management (see Urbanovič and Navickaitė 2016).

An increase of school autonomy has been the goal set in the education-management reforms in Lithuania; however, promotion of competition has never been the focus of such reforms. For example, the idea of funding on the basis of "pupil's basket" in Lithuania (money follows a client or education voucher) creates competition. However in Lithuania, in 2002, it was chosen for other purposes. Funding of schools based on the principle of education voucher was chosen in order to effectively use the funds allocated for education, create a transparent system of education funding, give pupils and their parents the opportunity to choose the educational institution, and rationally rearrange the school network.

The attitude of collaboration in Lithuania is difficult to assess, as neither the education strategies nor other documents related to school improvement reflect the aspects of school collaboration. This suggests that collaboration is not seen as a strategically important means for improving school performance and is not a state-sponsored activity.

Thus, over the past decades, the Lithuanian education system has undergone important changes in governance: the system has become more open and flexible, the financing model has changed, the school network has been reformed, autonomy of schools has increased, etc. It is difficult to assess the purpose of increasing the autonomy of schools, as the changes in governments also change the priorities of reforms. The purpose of this study is to assess whether the changes in education-management reforms that have taken place are successful and what affect they have had on school activities and relationships between schools. In order to answer these questions, a theoretical model of research was developed.

The study will seek to explore how the relationships between schools are affected by the education-management reforms such as decentralization of education (increasing school autonomy), the principles of school networking, the education-funding model, the possibility of choice of school, and other elements of post-bureaucratic education governance (see Figure 1).

Methodology

Research method. In order to inquire how certain elements of education-system governance and increased school autonomy affect inter-school relations, a qualitative research was chosen, namely, a semi-structured interview with school principals. A semi-structured interview allows the researcher to focus on issues that are central to the research questions, as well as providing flexibility and the possibility to inquire into the peculiarities of each case, and it ensures positive rapport between interviewer and interviewee, addressing and clarifying complex issues (Klenke et al. 2015).

Research sample. Data for the qualitative research presented in the article were collected in 2015–2016 by means of face-to-face semi-structured interviews with a sample of 24 school principals. Research samples were formed through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows you to choose the research participants who are able to inform the researcher on the research problem (Creswell 2007, 125). School principals are well aware of both the education-management reforms and school everyday life; they can reveal the change in school autonomy and school collaboration based on practice. The study took into account the school principals' managerial competence and experience in the school management processes. The research sample was designed to cover different types of schools (basic schools,

Figure 1

The theoretical model of education-management reform factors and the relationship between schools
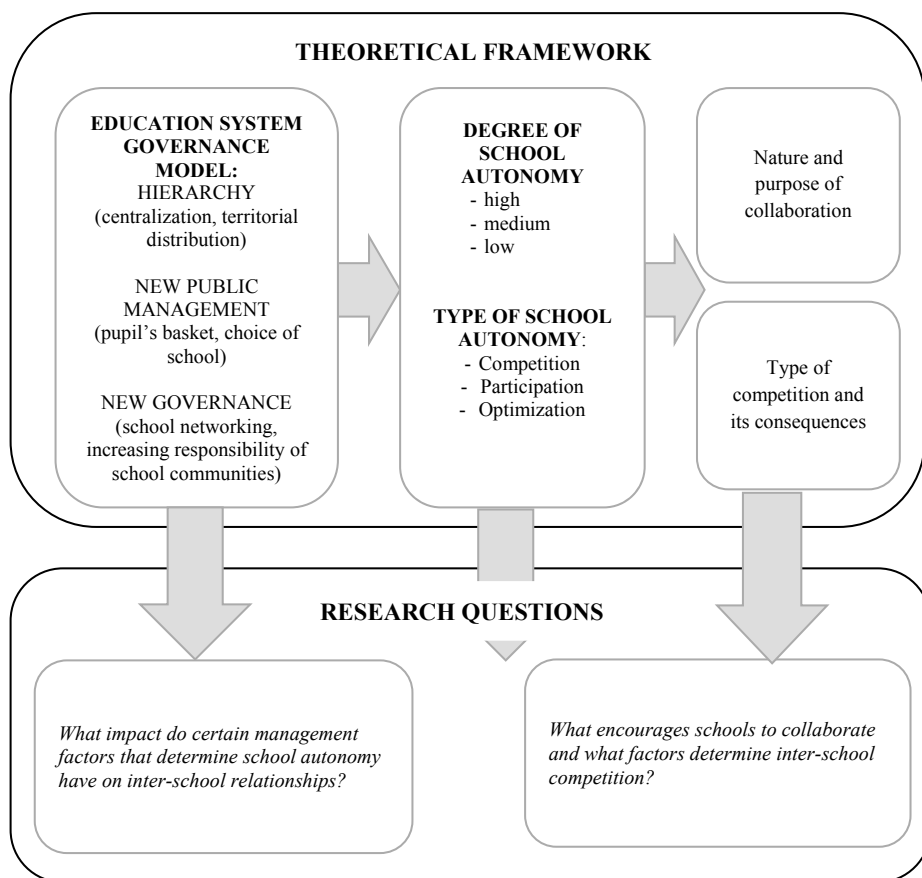
pro-gymnasiums, gymnasiums). Selection of schools was based on the official data of the State register of education and science institutions. However, the gradual strategy of sampling, which is typical of qualitative research, was also incorporated into the research (Flick 2006), which means that decisions of the researchers about the choice of cases were made in the process of data collection and interpretation. The research involved principals of nine basic schools, six pro-gymnasiums and nine gymnasiums. Schools from different regions of Lithuania were included in the selection of the study cases, taking into account the size of the city/settlement – metropolitan areas (5 schools), district centres (5 schools) and rural areas (14 schools) –, and school size.

Data collection. All research participants were approached in advance to obtain their voluntary consent to participate in the research. Taking into account the nature of the qualitative research and the importance of the natural environment, the researchers met with the interviewees at their work places – in schools. The interview schedule referred to issues discussed in Figure 1. The interviews were audio recorded. They lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Lithuanian. All interviews were fully transcribed.

Data analysis. Data analysis was based on several qualitative data-analysis procedures (Creswell 2009, 183–190): organizing and preparing the data for analysis, reading through all data, reducing data to themes by encoding and description, representing the data and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data. Data processing included interviews, transcription and primary structuring. The next step was to get acquainted with all the data collected by carefully reading all the transcriptions. First, the text of each interview was analyzed individually. The researchers read all texts several times, coded the data, and wrote notes. Later, codes and notes of different researchers were compared. Further analysis included categorization of the data, grouping the data from individual schools into larger areas of analysis, and comparison thereof.

Limitations

The research is limited by the fact that it focuses on the analysis of several phenomena which are difficult to define and difficult to measure. This raises difficulties in defining interdependent relationships and identifying how school-management factors and increased school autonomy affect relations between schools (i.e. cooperation and/or competition). The research and its results would be more substantial if we had an index of school autonomy as the starting point for more specific measurements. However, currently, there is no methodology for measuring such an index and the degree of autonomy of Lithuanian schools has not been measured. This was one of the reasons why a qualitative research strategy was chosen, and the validity of the results was based on the diversity of selected schools and the experience of school leaders. However, the method of interviews is able to capture the perceptions of school principles on school governance and school collaboration/competition, but the fact is that the existing empirical evidence is based on the perceptions of school managers rather than facts.

Results

The research data was grouped by means of using categorical analysis. On the basis of the overview by the initial category analysis we were able, following further

thematic analysis, to identify how education-management reforms which aim to increase school autonomy affect relations between schools.

Education-Governance Factors

In Lithuania, the majority of school owners are municipalities. They are responsible for the organization of the educational process and the rational organization of school networks. The research results show that some municipalities are rearranging the school network in a chaotic way, as they do not rely on the common coherent and rational strategy of reorganization of school networks and give priority to proposals of school communities or political interests, which causes tension between school communities and encourages competition between schools:

> *To be honest: after the beginning of the [school] network transformation, communication between schools disappeared.*
>
> (Principal 3)

Nevertheless, most municipalities sought to ensure that during the formation of the network of schools, each particular area includes schools which provide access to all educational programmes (pre-school education, primary education, basic education and secondary education), to ensure that the flow of pupils between schools is organized under the territorial principle, when pupils are assigned to a particular school according to the place of residence, to determine the movement of pupils between schools when they change the education programme. Schools in municipalities which managed to implement this reform do not feel any competition or tension:

> *Last year, the municipality confirmed a procedure which determined that children from particular villages have to attend a particular school. Therefore, we do not feel anger or have serious quarrels between the schools.* (Principal 6)

However, not all municipalities have implemented the reorganization of school networks smoothly. Schools are more closed off and feel competitive tension in municipalities that do not apply the territorial principle of assigning pupils to schools or do not follow it strictly, as well as municipalities where several schools that provide the same education programmes are assigned to the same area:

> *We do not fight; however, our relation in general has gone colder than it used to be. Since there is competition between pro-gymnasiums, there is competition in particular among gymnasiums.*
>
> (Principal 12)

Thus, we see that the formation of a school network and the application of the principle of territorial distribution differ across municipalities, and therefore relations between schools vary depending on the location of the school.

In terms of functional autonomy categories, schools feel the least autonomous in the field of financial management:

> *Financial autonomy, it is limited. Yes, you sign all the reports. Yes, you can enjoy the assignations, but nobody allows you to distribute the money.* (Principal 15)

In Lithuania, funding of schools based on the principle of education voucher, which was chosen in order to effectively use the funds allocated for education, creates a transparent system of education funding and rationally arranges the school network. However, the chosen funding model, which has been implemented for more than a decade, and the principles of school choice create tension and dissatisfaction in schools:

> *Education voucher made schools similar to shopping centres, which compete for money, for the customer. … it would be much better if the funding was given to particular sets of classes.* (Principal 1)

> *[Funds] are calculated according to education voucher method, but they are insufficient. … The methodology is not good.* (Principal 2)

Thus, we see that the existing financing model causes tension and promotes inefficient competition between schools. Recently, a number of Lithuanian municipalities have launched an experiment to test a new school-funding methodology, which is based on allocating funds to schools according to the number of sets of classes. It is unlikely that this will affect relations between schools, because those schools that currently compete with each other for pupils will continue to do so, because they will have to ensure a sufficient number of pupils are in the classroom.

Collaboration between schools

School principals were asked to comment on what education-management reforms principles encourage schools to collaborate and how they value their collaborative experiences. The principals' answers were grouped according to the categories corresponding to the reasons, types and objectives of school collaboration.

Although schools are not obliged to collaborate and this is not encouraged in any way, the research data allows us to distinguish a few basic types of school collaboration: with distant schools, with nearby schools, with similar ones and schools that share the same name.

Table 1

Categories and codes of the school collaboration.

Categories	Codes
Collaboration factors	the authorities' point of view
	strategic planning of the municipality
	school size and location
	financial and material situation
Collaboration types	with distant schools
	with nearby schools
	with similar ones (of the same level)
Collaboration objectives	to improve educational processes and outcomes
	to reduce/facilitate transition periods
	to raising teachers' qualifications
	to develop pupils' social skills

Usually schools very actively collaborate with distant schools, i.e. schools that are located in another municipality, the ones which do not need to compete for pupils, teachers, etc.:

> *To be honest, we collaborate more with schools which are more remote from us and are not potential competitors.* (Principal 1)

If the municipality does not create competition for pupils, schools are likely to collaborate with nearby schools:

> *We have more contact with Kaštono secondary school, because that is where our teachers work, that is where are teachers who [work in this school and] come to us. … And those children who after completion of eight grades go to Kaštono secondary school, [feel] very well, [because there is] a number of teachers, whom they know. Adaptation [of such children] is very different.*
> (Principal 1)

Moreover, the research results revealed that schools collaborate more actively with similar ones (if they do not compete for the same pupils). The provision of the same programme or the same type of school (Lithuanian schools are of five types: primary school, basic school, pro-gymnasium, secondary schools and gymnasiums) can be viewed as a similarity:

> *Yes, we collaborate with basic schools. We have chosen basic schools located in villages in other municipalities.* (Principal 5)

> *Yes, in the areas which interests us both. There is a similar school with intensified art lessons. It is a pro-gymnasium and art les-*

> *sons are conducted as in art school. We give performances there*
> *and they organize art exhibitions here.*   (Principal 9)

The research results revealed that collaboration often exists between nearby schools which provide different education programmes and teach the same streams of pupils. This makes it possible to further monitor pupil achievement and to improve the educational process on the basis of feedback. Typically schools which provide an educational programme of a lower level, such as a pro-gymnasium, tend to collaborate with schools which provide an educational programme of a higher level, such as a gymnasium:

> *We collaborate with the gymnasium to be able to know whether*
> *or not our children go [to learn] to the gymnasium, and … meet*
> *the qualitative indicators at the lowest point. [We collaborate in*
> *order] to check ourselves and, for example, to help prepare our*
> *children to adequately assess themselves.*   (Principal 1)

Schools which are located further from each other collaborate to share best practices:

> *We go to a school, get acquainted, sometimes we observe lessons,*
> *have discussions, look around, come back. That school comes to*
> *visit us, we demonstrate everything to it. This is development.*
> (Principal 14)

> *I bring best practices from each school I visit, and I am very*
> *happy about that because I go there to learn something …*
> (Principal 11)

Often, even competing schools have to collaborate to implement educational goals. Schools, especially small and/or rural schools, in order to mobilize their available human resources, collaborate by creating committees for pupil achievement evaluation or to deal with unforeseen or crisis situations:

> *We collaborate through evaluation of students' performance.*
> *This is probably the experience of most small schools, now*
> *we have to evaluate basic education performance and we do*
> *not have enough teachers, so we collaborate and form teams.*
> (Principal 17)

They also collaborate in order to save the available material resources, such as transport, through sharing the existing infrastructure for educational purposes:

> *We interact in such practical matters, as for example we save*
> *monetary funds with other schools by using one bus to go to*
> *olympiads. Some of us take them back, others take them there.*
> (Principal 11)

> *And we go to the gymnasium to exercise (we do not have a sports hall), our children go there to perform.* (Principal 14)

The research results also revealed that when school autonomy increases school collaboration is an important factor which strengthens the leadership of principals. When schools collaborate, principals provide support and advice to each other on various issues of school activities:

> *I very actively collaborate with other schools because I am an educational expert, thus I go to attestations of teachers or conformation. So we share experience and consult each other.*
> (Principal 11)

Also, principals share ideas and experiences on how to implement certain changes or innovations:

> *Principals of basic schools of districts and villages phone each other monthly, we gather in a school, share experiences, create procedures, discuss interpretations of the law, we tell each other what we do.* (Principal 6)

Competition between schools

The third issue of the research was to establish the managerial factors that stimulate competition between schools and the benefits it brings. The analysis of responses allowed the formation of the following categories:

Table 2
Categories and codes of the school competition.

Categories	Codes
Reasons of competition	chaotic networking of schools
	fight for pupils
	school ranking
Consequences of competition	seeking higher quality
	school isolation
	consumerism

Factors of competition between schools. The research results show that competition is most intense between schools which "fight" for the same pupils:

> *There is competition for children. Sometimes the competition is not very nice.* (Principal 3)

> *... there is a problem as the ninth and tenth classes overlap. The ninth, tenth classes or the first, second classes of gymnasium, we both need those children.* (Principal 16)

Competitive relations between schools are also affected by school ranking:

> *Here, now there is a journal _Ratings, which uses highly suspicious [school assessment] criteria. It forms the public opinion, especially of parents [about the school]. And then we have competition [for a higher ranking position].* (Principal 12)

However, the principals also note that excessive competition based on school-choice principles encourages a consumerist approach to education and reduces the standards for education quality:

> *[Competition] can be disastrous, [it encourages] to reduce the level of the requirements. ... It humiliates the authority of the teacher, and such long-term actions also debase the gymnasium name. ... And this encourages a consumerist attitude of those people in particular who take their children to one or another school.* (Principal 17)

Although the negative attitude of school principals towards competition between schools is dominant, they also notice positive aspects of competition:

> *[Competition is] an incentive to grow, be better...* (Principal 19)

Thus, we see that school relationships, influenced by the same governance factors, depending on the context, can have both positive and negative consequences.

Analysis

So we see that significant influence on relations between schools is made by education management reforms which are related to school autonomy: school choice opportunities, allocation of funds, school ranking, and the like. The decreasing role of the state and the increasing autonomy of schools have a different effect on the relationship between schools depending on governance models.

The study revealed that the experience of school collaboration and competition is dependent on the current policy of school network reorganization in the municipality. The research results show that municipalities, where the school network is formed consistently in order to ensure accessibility to all school levels and smooth movement of pupils between them, create conditions for school collaboration. Meanwhile, schools in municipalities, where the reorganization of the school network is chaotic and inconsistent with the jointly agreed strategy for school reform, are affected by competitive pressure. In this context, public authorities have

an important role to play in informing them about the quality of education, so that parents know what they are choosing and understand why it is best for their child. The Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania provides for the necessity of information about education, the purpose of which is to provide information "to help a person choose education and employment opportunities suited for him, facilitate his acquiring of career competences and actively build his own career."

The research results suggest that collaboration between Lithuanian schools is not yet well-developed and is not encouraged by public authorities, its benefit for schools and the system is not yet recognized. The school principals who participated in the survey indicated that collaboration and agreements between educational entities in reaching common goals are important for the implementation of the principles of autonomous governance. Therefore, autonomy of schools, which collaborate in a network, is lower because they have to coordinate their strategies and activities with the schools of the entire network and national standards. However, this provides a consistency and coherence to the education system.

It is noted that when a child moves from one phase of schooling to another, the thresholds of curriculum, teaching and learning methods, and educational environment are significant, there is a lack of integrity, which would direct the educational activities and results in the overall objective. Therefore, schools which educate the same streams of pupils are interested in collaboration in order to create favourable conditions for pupils to move from one phase of schooling to another or from one educational institution to another. Efforts are made to harmonize assessment systems of pupil achievement to ensure the integrity of the curriculum and facilitate the adaptation of pupils.

Discussion and conclusion

In the ideology of the NPM, school autonomy is increased to strengthen the ability of schools to participate in the competitive environment, create their own specific profiles and seek innovation. In the New Governance model, school autonomy is needed to create conditions for community empowerment and participation. The Lithuanian model of school autonomy can be described as a mixed one. Based on the fact that parents have the possibilities (though limited) to choose the school, it can be described as competitive. However, the elements of the participation model are also characteristic, as the research results and the analysis of strategic documents show an aspiration to create a community/democratic school.

One of the key factors which has impacted relations between schools are education decentralization-reforms that give more freedom and responsibility to municipalities and schools. Nevertheless, the overview of different paths of the decentralization process reveals that, on the one hand, decentralization of education encourages schools to collaborate by providing more autonomy to schools; on the

other hand, decentralization of education management and transfer of education regulation to the market make competition between schools more intense.

The role of municipalities in maintaining school collaboration is emphasized in other studies as well. For instance, Jones (2009, 136) comes to the conclusion that "Local authorities [LAs] played a crucial role in the productive functioning of clusters. It was seen to be essential that whilst LAs facilitated the work of clusters, schools must retain their autonomy. Schools should raise the issues whilst LAs provided guidance and encouragement. Clustering worked best when there was an explicit rationale for the work, a rationale that explicitly recognized the independence of the participating schools" (Jones 2009, 136).

As already mentioned, the research results suggest that collaboration between Lithuanian schools is not yet well-developed. The analysis of foreign experience shows that school collaboration is applied as one of the measures to improve school activities – "schools may seek to join a chain or be forced to do so as a result of their poor levels of performance or inspection reports" (Woods and Simkins 2014, 331). There are also specific programmes the government has initiated to support schools in collaboration. The case of "teaching schools" should be noted, which are "outstanding" schools that have been formally designated and centrally resourced to support other schools through the organization and delivery of initial and continuing teacher education and school-to-school support (Woods and Simkins 2014, 332).

The research is consistent with the results of previous research on the benefits of schools' collaboration (Higham and Earley 2013, 709) that notwithstanding evidence of highly competitive local contexts, the majority of school leaders were positive about school-to-school collaboration. Networks are providing invaluable support in assisting individual schools to focus on and prioritize the educative goals and needs of their local communities (Keddie 2014). School principals agreed that working in partnership with other schools, especially for small schools, was critical to improving the learning environment for students. "Schools working together leads to better results" (Chapman 2015, 47).

Theoretically, competition between schools on the one hand encourages schools to seek a higher quality of education, because if pupils and/or their parents can choose a school from several schools nearby, they will definitely choose the one with higher learning outcomes. However, this research emphasizes that schools, in order to attract more pupils, especially at a time when the country is overwhelmed by negative demographic trends, such competition reduces the level of requirements for learning outcomes. Schools in a competitive environment are more independent; however, as research results show, competition for pupils may lead to a decline in the quality of education due to fragmentation of the process and tension between and within schools.

A summary of the theoretical and empirical analysis is presented in the following table:

Table 3
Education management reform factors and the relationship between schools.

	School Autonomy		Nature of the relationship	Collaboration		Competition	
	type	*level*		*aim*	*scope*	*aim*	*scope*
Hierarchy (territorial distribution)		Low	Hierarchy	Collaboration to achieve the goals set by the central government	A higher level of formal collaboration	for advantage in the relationship with political power	Low level of school competition
New Public Management (pupil's basket, school choice)	Competitive	High	Market	Collaboration in extreme cases	Less collaboration due to competition	for advantage on the market of education services (among local schools)	High level of school competition
New Governance (formation of school network, increase of responsibility of school communities)	Participation/Optimization	Limited autonomy due to dependence of schools on each other	Network	Collaboration to achieve common (networked) goals	A higher level of formal and informal collaboration	for advantage on the market of education services (at regional or national level)	Low level of school competition

Thus, we can see that the degree of school autonomy is the lowest in the bureaucratic/hierarchical model of education governance, characterized by centralized solutions and territorial distribution, with no signs of informal co-operation, and a lack of conditions to allow for competitiveness between schools. Schools see this as an advantage for stability and friendly relationships between schools.

There are notable features of education-management reforms in Lithuania that are characteristic of the NPM model: student voucher and school choice, which promote a competitive environment between schools. In such an environment, schools are sufficiently autonomous, but their degree of autonomy is often determined by the leadership skills of school leaders and the activity of the school community.

In municipalities where the network of cooperating schools is formed (New Governance), schools are less autonomous but feel responsible for their commitment to network partners and for achieving common goals to ensure high-quality education.

In summary, the research results support Newman (2001, 3, cited in Woods and Simkins 2014, 331), who concluded that hierarchy, markets and networks can coexist and interact. This is consistent with the concept of hierarchy characteristic of the New Governance model. Schools may compete with the nearby schools if they fight for the same pupils, but they collaborate with more distant schools or schools in other municipalities, schools might be part of an integrated network (hierarchy), be involved in a collaborative network with schools outside the chain, and be in competition with other schools (Woods and Simkins 2014, 331). It is largely the competence of the school principal and community initiative that determine how much the school will use its autonomy to create and participate in collaborative networks or to create its own specific profile in order to gain a competitive advantage.

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