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Unanticipated Consequences of Reforms in School Governance

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Abstract

This article argues that policy development and evaluations should not only incorporate whether and to what extent the policies achieve the intended goals, but should also take the unintended consequences of the policies into account. Based on the classic work of the sociologist Robert Merton, this article addresses the side-effects of attempts that have been made by the Lithuanian national government to improve on the governance of basic and high-schools. The intended goals of the policies concerned the increase of autonomy of school governance through the decentralization of responsibilities; increasing autonomy of and control over school governance; increasing market-driven governance, inducing competition and collaboration between schools, and altering the relation between service providers and recipients.

An in-depth analysis shows that there were serious side-effects. Due to the limited knowledge and capabilities at the local level the policies resulted in sub-optimal decision-making at the school level. As the transfer went hand in hand with national laws and strict regulations, stipulating the financing and content of education, setting standards and uniform requirements this reduced the ability of schools to make autonomous decisions and rather turned them into bodies implementing national standards. A decrease in cost-efficiency is visible as every school has to make its own plans; administrative burdens increase, and insufficient funding results in a transfer of shortages instead of transferring the responsibility to find solutions for those shortages, and instead of becoming more collegiate, the relation between schools becomes competitive resulting in distrust with all the expected negative consequences.

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The plans to increase the autonomy of school governance could have developed rather differently if these unintended consequences had been taken into account beforehand. If such side-effects would be anticipated, that could have resulted in more realism, less one-sided and unfounded optimism and in the end, less frustration and demotivation.

Keywords:
policy evaluation, unanticipated consequences, Lithuania, autonomy in school governance, decentralization

1. Introduction

When evaluating public policies, evaluators still predominantly stick to the means-ends rationality and investigate whether and to which extent the goals as formulated by the decision-makers or stakeholders have been achieved through the program. The advantage of this approach is that such "Evaluation is neutral, objective research. It does not formulate problems and does not recommend ends (goals), but only tells to what extent goals have been achieved through a program. The function of an evaluation before an intervention is introduced on a full scale is to help determine the most efficient means for achieving the previously stated ends, that is, the means that will ensure goal achievement at the lowest cost" (Vedung 2017, 267).

Such an approach to evaluation makes perfect sense in establishing whether one gets "value for money", in ascertaining that "what matters is what works", and in furthering "evidence-based policy". Nonetheless, it disregards a classic sociological notion that research is also and especially needed in the unanticipated consequences of purposive action (Merton 1936). As Merton wrote already in 1957, research in these side-effects "serves further to direct the attention of the sociologist to precisely those realms of behaviour, attitude and belief where he can most fruitfully apply his special skills" (Merton 1957, 119), and "When focusing solely on … intended outcomes of purposive action, the threat is that one becomes converted into an industrious and skilled recorder of the altogether familiar pattern of behaviour, with the inquiry set by practical men of affairs" (120).

However, as will be elaborated upon below, an analysis into unanticipated consequences is filled with pitfalls. It is in need of specification and extensive research in policy analysis, enabling a framework through which an in-depth analysis of these unanticipated consequences becomes feasible. This article proposes such a framework through combining the original idea to investigate unanticipated consequences of purposive action (public policies) and modern-day theories on policy analysis, which enables policy analysts to go beyond just mentioning that such effects are apparent and that they are either beneficial or harmful.

That framework will be applied to the many attempts that have been made by national governments to improve on the governance of basic and high schools. In this case this is done through a conceptual analysis illuminated by practical examples of the experience of one of the Baltic countries – Lithuania.

Some of these attempts have been depicted as being just symbolic policies, given their simplicity in presentation, the ignorance of contextual features, and the disregard of empirical analysis (Edelman 1964, 23; Andrews and de Vries 2012, 438). Nonetheless even though the policies may not have achieved the intended goals, they were not without consequences. This article will use the framework proposed to argue that there is more at stake and that though symbolic policies might fail in achieving the intended effects, they do have multiple serious unanticipated consequences (Merton 1936; Howard 2006; Boudon 2016).

The main research question derived from this goal addresses what is known theoretically about unanticipated consequences of public policies, whether it is possible to specify the nature of such effects in a framework for evaluations of such policies, and how this applies to reforms aimed at increasing the autonomy in the governance of schools in Lithuania.

In Lithuania, the intended goals of the policies concerning the increase of autonomy of school governance were to improve school governance through the decentralization of responsibilities; increasing autonomy of and control over school governance; increasing market-driven governance, inducing competition and collaboration between schools, and altering the relation between service providers and recipients.

The argument central in this article is that no matter the appreciation of the intended goals, such policies do have dysfunctional unanticipated consequences, and that combining the classic theory of unanticipated consequences with modern-day theories on the policy process enables a more thorough and in-depth analysis of such effects. In order to make this argument, we will first give a theoretical review of the classic theory on unanticipated consequences of purposive action and combine this theory with recent policy theories in order to create a framework enabling the analysis of such effects. Subsequently this framework is used to present a concise description of the background of the six policies in the governance of schools and an in-depth analysis of their unintended consequences.

2. The theory of unanticipated consequences

In 1936 the American sociologist Robert Merton published one of his most cited papers, namely on "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Action". Three terms were central in that famous article. The first is the term "consequences". Merton himself limited consequences to those elements in the resulting situation which are exclusively the outcome of the action, i.e., those elements which would not have

occurred had the action not taken place.' (Merton 1936, 895). Purposive action was limited by Merton to address "conduct" as distinct from "behavior", that is, with action which involves motives and consequently a choice between various alternatives (ibid., 895). Unanticipated refers to those consequences of purposive action which are unforeseen. It is not about these consequences being necessarily desirable or undesirable. In fact, whereas the purpose of action is by definition desirable – at least from the perspective of the actor – the unanticipated consequences can be either functional, dysfunctional, or irrelevant (in Merton's terminology nonfunctional) (Merton 1968). The difference between intended and unanticipated consequences rather refers to the difference between manifest functions which are conscious and deliberate, and latent functions that are unconscious and unintended. As Merton emphasized in his classic work *Social Theory and Social Structure*, "Manifest functions are those objective consequences contributing to the adjustment or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognized by participants in the system. Latent functions, correlatively, being those which are neither intended nor recognized" (Merton 1957, 105). The latter are neither explicitly stated, recognized, nor intended by the people involved, but rather to be identified by observers. In case they are beneficial, they are called functions, and when harmful, "dysfunctions". According to Preston and Roots, one should distinguish between subjective motives of actions and the objective results of the actions (Preston & Roots, 2004). Both may coincide, but they can also vary independently.

Merton himself only differentiated unanticipated consequences of purposive actions in terms of 1) consequences to the actor(s), and consequences to other persons mediated through either the social structure, the culture and the civilization (Merton 1936, 895), and 2) between consequences being beneficial and denoted as functions and those being harmful, denoted as "dysfunctions".

His original analysis focused mainly on the causes of the emergence of unanticipated consequences. He mentioned five causes, namely *limitations in the existing state of knowledge*, being the result of ignorance – situations which demand immediate action of some sort will usually involve ignorance of certain aspects of the situation and will bring about unexpected effects (900), and economic scarcity of time and energy resulting in the failure "to obtain knowledge for predicting the outcomes of action"; *error* in the appraisal of the present and future situation, in the too-ready assumption that an action being successful in the past will continue to be successful in the future, in wishful thinking, and in the refusal or inability to consider certain elements of the problem; *economic interests*, in which immediate interests often dominate the consequences in the long-term; *basic cultural values*, in which the felt necessity of action out of basic values precludes the consideration of further consequences, and the appearance of so-called *self-defeating predictions*, where predicting a certain outcome itself tends to change the initial course of developments (904).

For scholars the distinction is important because making an analysis of unanticipated consequences implies that they should search for the "real" effects hidden behind "stated" ones (Berger 1963, 38). Because of the relevance thereof, the idea of unanticipated consequences of purposive action had a huge impact, especially in Sociology, not least because it urged scholars in that discipline to advance a "debunking motif" that tends toward the exploration of "real" effects hidden behind "stated" ones (cf. Ritzer 2000; Bernhard and Preston, 2004). As such, immense research based on this theory was conducted on unanticipated consequences of anti-gambling policies (Preston & Roots, 2004), drug-control policies (Chouvy 2013), and many other policy areas. As Bernhard and Preston noted, "Merton certainly served as a founding figure for this tradition as he sought to separate the stated motivations behind policy decisions from the unintended consequences that resulted" (Bernhard and Preston (2004, 1397).

2.1 Linking cause and effect

Such analyses are, however, filled with pitfalls. The first was mentioned already by Merton himself, namely how to ascertain that a manifest outcome is indeed the consequence of the purposive action and can be attributed to that action. Merton gave two reasons for such causal imputation, namely that the outcome would not have occurred, had the action not be undertaken, and secondly that the supposed relation between the action and the outcome "makes sense". Nowadays we have more advanced methods to make a convincing argument about cause and effect based on empirical research – experiments, statistical causal analysis, causal modelling, and qualitative comparative analysis. Policy analysis has also benefitted from advanced theories, more or less grounded in empirical research, giving the generative mechanisms and pointing out the specific combinations of contextual and instrumental variables that result in the effects. If the observer provides the generative mechanism between the purposive action and the outcome within the specific context, based on sound theorizing and empirical support, causal imputations will be stronger. Although the argument for causation cannot be proven and will always be contested, one can distinguish between stronger and weaker theoretical and empirical arguments about cause and effect.

2.2 Unanticipated consequences from an actor perspective

A second dimension of analyzing unanticipated consequences of purposive action distinguishes whether these consequences are beneficial or harmful. The issue that arises is "beneficial for whom" and "harmful for whom".

Merton distinguished between the consequences for the actor, the target group and society as a whole. The more recent typology proposed by Wilson about the distribution of costs and benefits of policies could add to this distinction (Wilson 1989; Knill and Tosun 2011). Wilson distinguishes between diffuse and narrowly

concentrated costs and benefits involved in a policy. This results in four possible types of policies, namely interest-group politics, in which both costs and benefits are concentrated, entrepreneurial politics, in which the benefits are diffuse and the costs concentrated, clientelist politics, in which costs are diffuse and benefits concentrated, and majoritarian politics, in which both costs and benefits are diffuse. Wilson's typology predicts the likelihood of conflicts about policies as one of the unanticipated consequences of policy-making. An even more advanced analysis would analyze the policy network (Ostrom 1990), include a stakeholder analysis (Freeman 1984) and an analysis of veto players (Tsebelis 2002).

"Stakeholder theory is about managing potential conflict stemming from divergent interests" (Frooman 1999, 193). It implies identifying the internal and external stakeholders, establishing "who is dependent on whom and by how much" (Frooman 1999, 201), and determining whether these stakeholders have claims on a policy and/or are affected by the policy. Echoing Benson (1982) one could identify stakeholders in the demand groups – the target group of the policy –, support groups – the actors providing resources for the policy –, administrative groups – the actors delivering the policy –, and coordinating groups – the actors managing and coordinating within and between programs.

Normally such stakeholder analysis would be conducted during the policy development phase, that is, before decisions are made. However, it might be much more interesting to analyze whether and how resource dependencies between stakeholders change as a result of the policy, and in what way an altered influence of the mentioned stakeholders on the decision-making process is seen as well as in what way their interests are affected as in the unanticipated outcomes of the new policy. Especially important are the unanticipated consequence of a new policy – for instance decentralization – on veto players – i.e. the institutional or partisan actors whose agreement is necessary for a change in the (new) status quo (Tsebelis 2002) –, and the impact of new veto-players appearing in or existing veto-players dropping out of the equation. According to Tsebelis three dimensions of veto players are crucial in this regard, their number, the ideological distance between them, and the internal cohesion of the policy interests of veto-players.

An important analysis in this respect is also to establish whether the resources actors bring in the action arena change; whether the preferences of actors in the arena change; whether their handling of knowledge and information changes; and whether their strategies change due to the policy. Within institutional analysis this depends on the change in working rules determining what is permitted, required and prohibited. This concerns entry and exit rules in the decision-making process, position rules in the execution of policies, scope rules regarding appropriate behavior and taboos, authority and aggregation rules regarding the permission or the prohibition of actions, information rules determining the transparency of the process, and payoff rules determining the sanctions for breaking the rules.

2.3 Unanticipated consequences from a policy perspective

The third dimension distinguished here is that the nature of purposeful action or the intended consequences thereof could have unanticipated consequences as well. This goes to the heart of policy-making, regarding first of all the goals (purposes thereof) and secondly the instruments used to achieve those goals.

As for the goals of policies, a useful typology to distinguish such goals is whether the policy is meant to be regulatory – specifying conditions and constraints for individual and collective behavior –; distributive – providing resources and infrastructure –; redistributive – changing the distribution of goods and services –; or constituent – modifying procedures and institutions (Lowi 1972). As for the unanticipated consequences thereof it is apt to refer to Knill and Tosun (2012). They argued that policies meant to be one kind of policy (regulatory or constituent) could well have consequences in a completely unanticipated way, namely in their distributive and redistributive effects, and vice versa (Knill and Tosun 2012, 18).

Similarly, unanticipated consequences can be the result of the instruments applied in a policy. Legal instruments (law-making, regulations) could have unanticipated consequences regarding the costs of their maintenance and compliance but could also result in changing ethics among people, who no longer act out of internalized norms and values, but out of procedural considerations. They no longer see behavior as good or bad in itself, based on the internalization of basic values, but only because it is or is not explicitly allowed by the law and regulations. This is seen as an inferior kind of morality. Furthermore, legal instruments could result in sustaining the domination of the least powerful people in society instead of equalizing power (Auerbach 1983, vii; De Vries 2016, 99).

The use of financial instruments – subsidies, levies, fines and rewards – is known for its so-called Matthew effect: "He who has, shall be given." It implies that such instruments are likely, but unintendedly, to increase inequality, as the larger part of subsidies are received by groups who need them the least. The same goes for communication as a policy instrument. Regarding the latter instrument it is to be expected that communication increases the knowledge gap. The unanticipated consequence of information and communication transfer is that those people who are already well informed will benefit most, and such instruments increase the difference between the haves and the have-nots.

The unanticipated effects of purposive actions (policies) could be inherent to the nature of the action as such and a consequence of the purposes opted for. Similarly, the unanticipated consequences of using specific policy instruments could be seen in the inherent effects each of these instruments has by nature, but also in the spillover effects of the use of one instrument, e.g. legal instruments, for the costs of other distinguished instruments, i.e. economic, communicative and constituent instruments.

2.4 Towards a framework

In conclusion, this section argued that it might still be very fruitful to examine the unanticipated consequences of purposive action, as suggested originally by Robert Merton. It also argued that policy-making as an important type of purposive action provides an excellent case for such analysis. This is the more the case as the theories and typologies concerning policy-making as developed in the last few decades enable researchers to limit, specify and understand the nature of the unanticipated effects of policy-making. Using 1) theories on network analysis, stakeholder analysis, and veto players to find out for whom such effects are beneficial or harmful, and 2) typologies on policy goals and instruments to find out whether spillover effects are noticeable from one type of policy to another or whether unanticipated effects of specific policy instruments occur, together form the building blocks of a framework to understand the relevance of such unanticipated consequences.

The idea of this framework is to stay as close to the original idea of Robert Merton and simultaneously to combine his theory with modern-day theories on the policy process. Whether this is a sound idea and results into a manageable and valid framework in that it measures the most relevant dimensions of unanticipated consequences, remains to be seen. Below we will apply this framework to the reforms in school governance in Lithuania. This analysis incorporates the following elements:

Table 1

A framework for analyzing unanticipated consequences of purposive action

Dimension	Main aspects	Indicators
Contents of the purposive action	Goals	What does the actor want to achieve?
	Means	How does the actor intend to achieve it?
Arguing the cause-effect relation of anticipated and unanticipated consequences	The strength of the arguments used	Outcomes of empirical research
		Theories about generative mechanisms
Distribution of unanticipated consequences	Distribution of costs	Costs being either diffuse or concentrated
		The distribution of cost over stakeholders
	Distribution of benefits	Benefits being diffuse or concentrated
		The distribution of benefits over stakeholders
Changes in the policy network	Veto players	Increase or decrease in the number of veto players
		Increase or decrease of the internal cohesion of veto players
		Increase or decrease of distance between veto players
	The institutional frame of the network	Change in entry and exit rules
		Change in relevant resources of actors
		Change in transparency rules
		Change in action strategies
Spillover effects	of policy goals	Unanticipated effects crossing between regulation, distribution, redistribution, or constituency
	of policy instruments	Unanticipated effects of legal, financial, communicative and organizational instruments

3. Unanticipated effects of the decentralization of the Lithuanian education system

This section gives an illustration of the above-presented framework to analyze unanticipated consequences in purposeful action. First, we address the background of the educational system in Lithuania. Next, the unanticipated effects of the decen-

tralization in this system are addressed, following the elements in the framework. This results in Table 2, presented at the end, in which each of the elements given in Table 1 is concretized.

3.1 Background of the decentralization reforms in Lithuania

The previous section concluded with a framework to analyze unanticipated consequences of the policies. The next two sections focus on an application of the framework to the policies, intended to improve the nature of school governance in Lithuania. The goal thereof is to illustrate the added value of the above-presented framework. All the policies introduced are aimed at enhancing the autonomy of local school governance but face the dilemma that such autonomy results in varying practices, not always in line with national goals.

Lithuania, a country with a population of about 2.8 million, has achieved a rapid socio-economic and political transformation since the re-establishment of its independence in 1990. The period has been marked by a number of significant economic, social and political structural changes. Nonetheless, stability is also seen. The Lithuanian education-system governance is still 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). The model of the Lithuanian education-system governance features some elements of post-bureaucratic education governance (Urbanovič et al. 2019). Only gradually is the Lithuanian education system becoming more decentralized. Nowadays, national institutions, municipalities and educational institutions share responsibility for the quality of the education provided (Eurydice 2021).

At the national level, education is organized through laws and general procedures that describe the principles and criteria for organizing education. For example, at the governmental level the rules for the development of the network of state and municipal schools need to be approved. National regulations establish the basic principles of how the municipality should manage the network of schools and set up, reorganize, or liquidate educational institutions (Eurydice 2019). In Lithuania, funding for education per learner is relatively small. In 2019, the country spent 4.3 percent of GDP on education. Although Lithuania invests a similar share of national income in education as Japan or Germany, its GDP per capita is about a third lower than the OECD average (OECD 2017).

The funding model for pre-school, pre-primary and general education is based on coherence between the basic education costs basket and the implementation of curricula. Usually it is called the "class basket". Approximately 80 % of funding is allocated not to each individual pupil in the class but according to the size of the

class. The municipalities allocate less than 20 % of the funds to the organization and management of the education process, education aid, assessment of learning achievements, etc. All state, municipal and private schools receive the "class basket" funds. Other than these funds, the state and municipalities allocate housekeeping funds to their schools (Eurydice 2019).

Municipalities set and implement their own strategic education plans in accordance with the national documents. Municipalities are responsible for ensuring formal education up until the age of 16, organizing non-formal education, transportation to educational institutions and other aspects. Most Lithuanian schools belong to municipalities. There are 60 municipalities in Lithuania. Demographic issues pose major challenges for municipalities. Due to the declining number of school-age children and the internal migration of citizens to cities, Lithuanian municipalities face different challenges. In cities, more than a quarter of primary and almost a fifth of pre-school pupils are educated in overcrowded classrooms (ŠMSM 2020). In smaller municipalities, meanwhile, student numbers are declining. They have to decide how to consolidate the school network and to ensure the quality and accessibility of education.

The school organizes the education process – for example, teachers are able to adapt the core curriculum to children's individual needs (Eurydice 2021). Formal education is typically provided by public entities. However, private-sector education providers, which are not many, are recognized and regulated by national legal acts. In 2019–2020, there were 1,056 general schools in Lithuania, with 326,677 pupils and 28,599 pedagogical and administrative staff (Statistical Yearbook of Lithuania: Education 2020). Salaries of general education and vocational training teachers are established by law. Each school determines, based on the predefined methodology, the number of teachers it needs and the workload for those teachers, taking into account the needs of the school and the school community.

In Lithuania a child must start attending pre-primary education on turning six years of age during the calendar year (pre-primary education is obligatory). Education is compulsory until the age of 16, meaning that primary and lower secondary education is mandatory. By that time, the learner will have usually finished the course of lower secondary education (10 grades). The two-year upper secondary curriculum is implemented by gymnasiums. Almost everyone completes upper secondary education, and the number of people completing higher education is well above the EU and OECD averages.

In recent years, the lack of progress in student achievement has been of particular concern in Lithuania. Research shows that school leadership is one of the most important factors influencing student learning success. In its optimal form, school leadership strengthens the school culture and microclimate, motivates teachers and improves the quality of teaching and learning. It is also emphasized that the expres-

sion of school leadership is stronger in those schools with a higher degree of school autonomy (European Commission 2012).

Therefore, over the past decade, much attention has been paid to strengthening school autonomy. Although comparative studies (e.g. Eurydice 2007) show that Lithuanian schools are quite autonomous in comparison to schools in other countries, in some areas they lack autonomy. Often, school principals complain about a lack of independence, especially in the area of financial management (see Urbanovič and Navickaitė 2016). Provisions of school autonomy and development of decentralization have been enshrined in the current Lithuanian strategic documents and legal acts on education.

The Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania (2011) and the Law on Local Self-Government of the Republic of Lithuania (2014) conferred a lot of powers in the area of education governance to municipalities. The laws enable them to encourage greater school autonomy. The Law on Education defines the functions of the head of the school and thus determines their powers as well as the functions of the school council as the supreme self-governing body of the school in making important decisions. Functions that promote involvement of the school community in decision-making as well as details regarding the formation and role of school self-governing bodies are still lacking.

The Concept of the Good School (2015) enshrines the intended goals, namely that schools must be trusted, they must operate autonomously, and account for due performance in accordance with the law. The National Strategy for Education 2013–2022 and the Seventeenth Program of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania have further incorporated the goal to give more power to schools, to develop and implement a model of autonomy for general education, to establish accountability mechanisms to the public regarding the results achieved, and to monitor developments in school autonomy.

Finally, the Lithuanian Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030" provides for the further decentralization process, extension of community self-governance, and greater empowerment of schools.

In view of the above, the Lithuanian education system still balances between the swings of centralization and decentralization. Formulation and maintenance of national goals is the responsibility of the national government, while the implementation thereof is the responsibility of the school councils and municipalities, which have ample discretion in implementing the goals according to the local needs and specifics and are able to avoid political interference.

3.2 The high expectations

As we saw in the previous section, Lithuania's strategic documents reflect the desire to increase the independence of schools. Legal instruments are the main tools used

to achieve this goal. There is often a debate in the educational community about the autonomy of schools, especially when it comes to defining the concept, making it clear that different stakeholders' perceptions and expectations of the concept of school autonomy vary.

From the point of view of *the teacher and pupils*, such autonomy allows the school to align the principles of assessment of pupils' achievements within the curriculum and to implement the curriculum, taking into account the specifics of the school and the needs of the pupils and their environment. Attitudes towards the role of the school community reflect the real state of implementation of de-centralization and the level of democracy in the school. Learners can be viewed as customers or participants, i.e. partners who are co-responsible for the education-al process. Recently, general education programs in Lithuania have been renewed and are planned to start as of 2023. Decentralization involves, for instance, that the guidelines for the renewal of general education curricula (ŠMSM 2019a) stipulate that the subject teacher will get the opportunity to decide for up to 30 percent of the content of the subject. At the same time, such teacher and student autonomy is limited by the system of testing and state maturity examinations, as assessments of achievement are conducted through centrally approved programs.

From the point of view of *the school principal*, autonomy provides the oppor-tunity to use one's organizational skills and apply innovative methods in school gov-ernance, thus enabling efficiency in the use of material and human resources. Local decisions are more in line with particulars of the issues and local capabilities, allow-ing for rational allocation of resources based on actual needs (Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Walsh 1996). In the opinion of *school principals*, this ensures the efficiency of decisions and the proper use of the resources (Christ and Dobbins 2016). Research shows that schools in Lithuania lack financial autonomy (Urbanovič and Navickaitė 2016; Vaitiekūnas et al. 2020), as the use of resources is regulated by the central government. Therefore, the possibilities to take local needs into account are limited.

From the point of view *of the school*, autonomy provides the possibility to build on school strengths, established traditions, organizational procedures and de-cisions that shape the school's image in the local community. The decentralization of education governance gives schools more rights, flexibility and possibilities to develop their activities and services, which motivates them to be more adaptable to rapidly changing social conditions and to respond more promptly to local needs (Altrichter et al. 2014, 676; Christ and Dobbins 2016, 7). In this perspective, when activities can be undertaken in a more autonomous way, it results in activities tai-lored to the needs of the local community and/or stakeholders, and as a result the school acquires a higher status (Nowosad 2008, 138–139).

From the point of view of *the stakeholders*, autonomy means enabling the community to participate in the organization of the school activity, which makes it more interested in meeting the set standards and goals and in the educational

process as such, and thus the community monitors the activity itself (Cook 2007; Hanushek et al. 2013). This increases the publicness and transparency of the school governance system. Involvement of the community increases the responsibility of the local community for the school activities and its public image (Astiz et al. 2002, cited in Zajda 2006, 12; Christ and Dobbins 2016). In Lithuania, involvement of the public in the management of schools can be realized through activities of school councils, which involve representatives of the school community and stakeholders. According to the Law on Education (Art. 60, 3), "The school council is the highest school self-government institution consisting of students, teachers, parents (including guardians and caregivers) and representatives of the local community." The school council is accountable to the school community who elect the members. In reality, however, the school council does not have the status of a governing body and therefore only performs a support function.

From the point of view of *the municipality*, autonomy increases the responsibility of school councils for decisions made at the school level and strengthens the role of the municipality as the body that provides support and advice. In Lithuania, schools often lack professional help from municipalities. One of the reasons is that the qualification requirements for employees of municipal education departments are often lower than for school heads. Therefore, the municipalities lack the competence to provide good advice and are limited to the performance of administrative functions.

From the point of view *of the national level government*, autonomy allows for a diversity of schools, and a diversity of strategic goals and tools, and stimulates the development of unique educational services. The degree of school autonomy depends on the extent to which public authorities are prepared to delegate power to the lower levels, the role of public authorities in cooperating with educational institutions: supervisor/controller, coordinator, idea generator, consultant, support provider, partner, etc.

3.3 The unanticipated effects

Scholars who have studied experiences in education reforms through decentralization point out two opposite aspects of reforms like decentralization concerning responsibility and accountability. The main issue is that in decentralization processes, the trend of decentralizing authorities and responsibilities in decision-making from the centralized national level towards the middle or local level goes hand in hand with the centralization of regulations, standards and uniform requirements, as seen in areas of curriculum development and the assessment of students, schools, and education systems. This is not only seen in Lithuania, but was also seen in other OECD countries like Belgium, England, and Switzerland (OECD 1995; Eurydice 2007; Maroy 2008).

The second issue is that researchers note that with the decentralization of responsibilities in the educational system, the time available for leaders and managers to address substantial educational issues and to maintain relationships between teachers and students decreases, as the administrative burdens increase (Fullan 1991; Karlsen 2000). Also in Lithuania, leaders complain that the range of activities currently performed by managers is very wide: from public procurement to implementation of data protection requirements, but hardly address issues related to the education itself (Lithuanian Trade Union of Heads of Educational Institutions 2021).

Third, the decentralization of responsibility and authority to make decisions results almost by definition in varying content. Such variance is not always, or rather not ever, appreciated by central government agencies. They do not see this as an increase in quality, but rather as a danger for accomplishing national educational goals. This has in recent years resulted in a search to strengthen the control over autonomous schools (Brauckmann and Schwarz 2014, 825–826). Glatter (2012, 564) notes the paradoxicality of this situation, where continuous attention for school autonomy is often accompanied by the formation of accountability structures that result in strict boundary conditions set by central governments and their growing control. Such trends distort the meaning of autonomy and limit the effects of real school autonomy on improved student learning outcomes (Woessmann et al. 2007; OECD 2011). The essential characteristics of accountability are visible in evaluations deemed necessary for state institutions seeking to ensure the achievement of the goals set by national government. Regarding the increase of administrative costs due to decentralization, Lithuania, witnesses an increasing trend of *multi-accountability*. Schools now have to account for their activities to a wide range of entities, such as the Ministry of Education, local councils, as well as the wider society – parents, teachers, sponsors, etc. (Eurydice 2007). The increased school autonomy goes hand in hand with an increase in administrative forms, public accountability, national inspection systems, assessments of compliance with standards, and performance rating systems (Glatter 2012, 568; Brauckmann and Schwarz 2014, 823; Keddie 2015, 2). Parents and pupils do not seem to profit. Although the idea is that such accounts are beneficial for local stakeholders who need information on whether the school's performance is in line with their expectations, in Lithuania they are without consequences, as many municipalities apply the principle of territorial distribution – i.e. pupils are assigned to a school by place of residence. Parents – knowing about the unsatisfactory quality of school activities – have no opportunities to opt for a specific school for their children or to opt out.

Additionally, external school evaluation bodies (inspection agencies) have been set up (Eurydice 2007). In 2004–2005, Lithuania introduced common criteria for internal and external school evaluation. As in other countries, the main mission of external school evaluation bodies is to help assess and advise schools on improving their performance. In Lithuania this role is exercised by the National Agency for

Education. The agency does not have the direct power to sanction underperforming schools, but it does carry out functions of external evaluation, publishes the results thereof, and advises schools on the improvement of the identified problem areas.

With growing school autonomy, the central government has taken up initiatives to improve on school accountability and external evaluation systems. Although accountability and external evaluations are introduced as a kind of safeguard that ensures the implementation of national education quality standards and the promotion of competition between schools by encouraging improvement of performance results and their accessibility to the public, thereby providing greater choice to parents and students, they limit school autonomy.

In theory, one of the main advantages of decentralization is the ability *to focus on customer needs* (Osborne and Gaebler 1992, 251; Christ and Dobbins 2016). This argument, however, is disputed, as such customization goes contrary to the principle of equality often emphasized by national governments (Ostrom 1990, 212; De Vries 2000, 199). Debates are especially present if, for example, the local implementation would result in a varying provision of education services and a varying quality by different schools within municipalities or regions. This is also relevant within the Lithuanian context, as national and international surveys (see OECD 2018) show growing gaps in student achievement, including differences in achievement throughout municipalities (ŠMSM 2019b).

There is also doubt concerning the possibilities of decentralization *to take into account local specifics* and *to respond more sensitively to the local needs* (Page 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000; Brauckmann and Schwarz 2014). Local government officials often lack the knowledge of how to deal with and solve problems of a complex nature (Walsh 1996). There are areas that require broad knowledge extending the local level, of which the local authorities may not be aware (for example, goals of the national or international education policies; Walsh 1996). This implies that the autonomous governance of small school communities can conflict with issues of coherence and continuity of the educational system as a whole. For example, it is stated that Lithuania is quite independent in the field of education organization (Eurydice 2007), but that the balance between national standards and local needs and opportunities needs to be maintained to ensure smooth vertical continuity of education (learning from pre-school education to doctoral studies) and horizontal continuity (the possibility to move between schools pursuing educational programs at the same level) (Urbanovič and Navickaitė 2016).

Statements of scholars (Rondinelli and Cheema 1983; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Walsh 1996) on a *more efficient and productive decentralized distribution of public goods and services* are also disputable, as they fail to distinguish between allocative efficiency – the efficiency in allocating finances by the national government to local schools that is expected to increase because of decentralization, and cost-efficiency – the efficiency in managing, developing and implementing plans

at the local level, which is expected to decrease as a result of decentralization, as the goals thereof could be achieved at a lower cost if centralized. The Lithuanian experience shows that a centralized system of distribution of textbooks or teacher training is much cheaper than a decentralized system in which each school would have to take care of it by itself (Želvys 2002). Developing one plan at the national level is also more efficient than having each school making its own plan. The potential advantage of efficiency is also controversial, as local authorities often lack the financial resources and financial literacy to adequately implement a decentralized policy (De Vries 2000).

Proponents of democratic governance argue that *decentralization allows for a wider distribution of powers among different levels of education* and therefore enables more stakeholders of education to participate in the decision-making process. However, scholars also provide strong counterarguments to such a claim. First, central government is rarely interested in genuine decentralization with all the resulting variance and is therefore inclined to impose strict boundary conditions to outcomes of such stakeholder involvement (Želvys 2002, 23–27). Second, local authorities are often not interested in widespread participation of stakeholders, or in assuming more responsibility as they often lack the capacity to support this. Research conducted in Lithuanian schools also confirms that school communities often try to avoid the additional responsibility for decision-making (Urbanovič and Navickaitė 2016). Such tendencies contradict the argument that *greater decentralization implies greater school democracy*. Scholars also note that if there is no (national) regulation on the mandatory inclusion of the public in management processes, it is left to the goodwill of the local government, which is not always present (Cook 2007). Lithuanian experience shows that instead of decentralization resulting in the empowerment of all stakeholders at the local level, it more likely just enhances the power of local politicians (Želvys 2002, 23–28). In addition, despite Lithuania's strategic goals to decentralize education, the (unintended) consequence is that involvement of the school community in management processes becomes merely symbolic, only a formality, or advisory at best, and does not pose an incentive for more active participation of stakeholders (Urbanovič and Navickaitė 2016).

The self-evident conclusion is that decentralization of educational governance is a complex and contextual process in which an alignment of the principles of centralization and decentralization is at stake, with the educational system becoming decentralized in the implementation, and simultaneously more centralized in terms of regulations and boundary conditions, restricting the autonomy of schools (cf. Turner 2004). The more interesting conclusion is that it would be preferable if the stakeholders, irrespective of whether they want the decision-making process to be more centralized or decentralized, would acknowledge the existence of such unanticipated consequences of moving in one or the other direction. That would diminish conflict, disappointment, and frustration from symbolic policies that are implemented for wonderful goals.

Table 2
An illustration of the framework

Dimension	Main aspects	Anticipated consequences	Unanticipated consequences
Contents of the purposive action	Decentralization of schools' responsibility	Higher quality because of customized educational processes as these are handled by those closest to the children	The limited knowledge and capabilities at the local level are likely to result in sub-optimal decision-making at school level which calls for national laws and regulations
	Transfer of decision powers to schools	Increases the autonomy and responsibility of each member of the school community	As the transfer goes hand in hand with national laws and strict regulations, stipulating the financing and content of education, setting standards and uniform requirements this reduces the ability of schools to make autonomous decisions and turns them into bodies implementing national standards
		Increased allocative efficiency as funds can be spent according to local needs instead of national standards	Decrease in cost-efficiency as every school has to make its own plans
	Shared responsibility	Transparency and efficiency of decision-making processes; schools become accountable for timely and effective solutions; involvement of stakeholders enhances the transparency of decisions and results	Increased administrative burdens/the accountability system/national control of schools limit the opportunity to make substantial decisions, while increasing the reporting, monitoring and evaluations
	Rationalization of activities	Promote compliance with local needs	Lacking competences and highly regulated procedures result in additional costs without substantial impacts
Distribution of costs and benefits	Resource optimization	Through decentralization, the resource use is focused on local needs and opportunities	The insufficient funding results in a transfer of shortages instead of transferring the responsibility to find solutions for those shortages
Changes in the policy network	Promotion of network building	Autonomous decision-making through negotiation, collegiate involvement of the school community would result in cooperation and mutual trust	Instead of becoming more collegiate, the relation between schools becomes competitive resulting in distrust with all the expected negative consequences

	Veto players and the institutional frame of the network	Decentralization aims at transferring veto powers in decision-making from national to local level by broadening the entry of local stakeholders in the decision-making process	The need to judge whether schools fulfil national laws and their tight regulations result in reducing the ability of schools to make autonomous decisions and turns them into bodies implementing national standards
	Change in transparency rules	Increased monitoring and evaluation aims at: • Transparency • Accountability • Increased influence of local stakeholders	Increased monitoring and evaluation results in: • Goal displacement • Administrative burden • Stricter boundary conditions • Decreasing administrative support
Spillover effects	Spillover effects of adaptations in the national law to change the organization of the educational system	Providing a legal base to give schools autonomy and responsibility in order to improve education and give parents more opportunities to opt for a certain school and to opt out	• A need emerges for capacity building at the local level in terms of knowledge and skills to avoid sub-optimal decisions • A need emerges to adapt local regulations, e.g. the territorial distribution by municipalities, which does not allow for free choice to opt for or opt out of schools • Opposite effects occur in schools in rural and urban regions as class-size and characteristics of learners vary
	Spillover-effects of the combination of decentralization and national controls and oversight	This aims at ensuring that school-level decisions do not contradict national regulations	• Additional national regulations regarding information-exchange, criteria for judging quality, monitoring and evaluations; this limits the policy discretion at the local level and results in partial centralization

The analysis of different directions in the decentralization process reveals that although decentralization of educational governance gives more autonomy to schools, it also induces schools to either collaborate or become more competitive. The positive effect, or at least the goal thereof, is that such competition between schools and increased school autonomy encourage schools to seek better quality and pay more attention to the learners' needs and abilities (Maroy 2008, 18).

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" (Urbanovič et al. 2019). Assessing the effects thereof in Lithuania, one has to distinguish between rural and urban municipalities. In urban areas with a large population and thus a large number of pupils, consumers can choose between providers, but in rural municipalities there is no such choice. This implies that schoolchildren most often stay in their school even if the results of evaluations and assessments on their school are disappointing.

Proponents of the application of market principles in the education system argue that schools, which seek a competitive advantage, are encouraged to develop their own specific profiles that meet local needs and to introduce innovations. However, recent research shows that market competition does not automatically result in diversity and innovation (Adnett and Davies 2000, 165). First, not all schools are able to properly assess the situation and select a profile that meets the local needs. Schools often lack human and financial resources to create and maintain their own specific profile. Therefore, Levin and Fullan (2008) criticize the idea of directing schools towards choice and competition as tools for improving school performance. They emphasize that this does not at all guarantee better learning outcomes. In addition, studies show that the exit option and the free choice for schools do enhance competition between schools but also stimulate an inflation of assessments, as schools will try everything to score high on criteria that are measured and will neglect what might be important but cannot be measured. Lithuanian experiences also show that schools, in order to attract more pupils through competitive measures, result in a decline in the quality of education due to fragmentation of the process and tensions between and within schools (Urbanovič et al. 2019).

The focus on standards and auditing was criticized before (Keddie 2015, 7). According to Keddie, such instruments strengthen hierarchical supervision of teachers, create a climate of distrust, diminish the quality of teaching content and methods, and restrict measurement to student performance along prefixed and decontextualized standards. The same is confirmed by the Lithuanian experience, when after the introduction of testing of students' achievements every two years, teachers often start to organize the educational process to comply to the testing standards.

Furthermore, such standards, and the need to meet them, make communication and interaction between teachers of competing schools disappear, and while schools are expected to collaborate, in fact, they become isolated. Thus, the sector, which should rely on mutual care, interchange, assistance and understanding, gives preference to individualism, anonymity and territorial fragmentation.

Previous research in Lithuanian schools (Urbanovič et al. 2019) revealed that the experience of school collaboration and competition is dependent on the current policy of the school network reorganization in the municipality. The research results showed that municipalities where the school network ensures accessibility to all school levels and smooth movement of pupils between them create conditions for school collaboration. Schools in municipalities where the organization of the school network is inconsistent with the jointly agreed strategy for school reform become affected by competitive pressure.

This concise illustration of unanticipated effects of the decentralization in the Lithuanian educational system is summarized in Table 2, which is similar to Table 1, but for the level of abstraction. It shows how the framework can be applied in concrete situations.

4. Conclusions

This article asked what is known theoretically about unanticipated consequences of public policies, whether it is possible to specify the nature of such effects in a framework for evaluations of such policies, and how this applies to reforms aimed at increasing the autonomy in the governance of schools in Lithuania. It started by addressing the theory on anticipated consequences as originally developed by Robert Merton and proposed a framework for its use in policy-making processes being illustrative for purposeful action. The main message thereof is that actors who want to achieve goals through purposeful actions always have to deal with unanticipated consequences. The proposed framework suggests to search for such unanticipated consequences in public policies through analyzing the contents thereof, i.e. the goals and instruments, the distribution of costs and effects, changes in the policy networks, and spillover-effects.

The usefulness of the proposed framework was illustrated by taking the example of the decentralization of the educational system in Lithuania. This illustration shows the emergence of unanticipated consequences thereof in practice. This analysis should not be interpreted as a critique of the authors on trends towards more autonomy in school governance. On the contrary, the critique rather addresses the one-sided, overly optimistic goals with which such trends are developed. It seems that policymakers only pay attention to the goals as formulated and how to achieve these and that they disregard the side-effects, which thus become unanticipated

consequences. The result thereof is that at the start every group of stakeholders applauds such a trend, but in the end many of them are disappointed and frustrated.

The main finding of the case-study in this regard is that providing more autonomy to local school governance results in variance in the decisions made by local school councils. Within the development of such plans, the benefits are very diffuse as many local stakeholders, each with their own preferences and interests, become important elements in the policy-network. Such plans to increase the autonomy of school governance also result in a changed network with regard to veto-players. The central government agencies seem to lose veto-powers but regain these quickly by developing a system of standards and restrictions framed as transparency rules, increasing the administrative load for the local players and simultaneously minimizing their discretion. The unanticipated effect is that these restrictions result in a bias in the focus of local school governance. They become solely focused on those standards and regulations, instead of what is needed from a local perspective in terms of content and educational quality.

The plans to increase the autonomy could have developed rather differently if these unintended consequences had been taken into account beforehand. The plans with their intended and unanticipated consequences could have been subjected to widespread deliberation what rules of transparency, accountability and evaluations, and what regulatory restrictions and standards are needed, what discretion is needed and would be given to local schools, and whether the plans for increased autonomy in school governance would still be considered worthwhile. In summary, the purposeful action of decentralization in the education system impacts not only in the expected positive way, but has serious side-effects. It would be preferable if such side-effects were anticipated beforehand, instead of becoming unanticipated consequences. That would result in realism, less one-sided and unfounded optimism and in the end, less frustration and demotivation.

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