Looking for the "inexplicable something": which aspects form a school's reputation?

Mari-Liis Tikerperi[a1]

[a] Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu

Summary

In the common use, the term "reputation" (also imago and image) is often referred to as an abstract evaluation while characterising institutions or individuals. In academic literature, reputation is more commonly related to studies in marketing, politics, management and organisation culture (da Camara, 2011; Skallerud, 2011). Several scholars have reported that nowadays,school leadership has changed, and general management skills have become more essential (Harris et al., 2003). Reputation is related to the satisfaction or "benefit" that an organisation can offer to its stakeholders (Brown et al., 2006; Gilpin, 2010; Helm, 2011) and schools should involve their interest groups (Kukemelk & Ginter, 2016; Porterfield & Carnes, 2012) for the purpose of school improvement. Moreover, in the situation of growing public interest in schools (Breiter & Ruhe, 2018; Isaksson & Enbom, 2015) and the competition between the schools (Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Isaksson & Enbom, 2015; Türk et al., 2011), they have to prove their attractiveness.

Although it seems that nowadays it is easier to share information, many authors have noted that during the last decades, communication has changed due to the rapid developments in information and communication technologies (Porterfield & Carnes, 2012; Watson, 2012). Changing media environment and mediatisation (Breiter & Ruhe, 2018; Gilpin, 2010) are new challenges for schools as for any other organisation.

Estonia's reputation in general education has been due to the students' outstanding results in recent PISA tests, and highlighted in the national education marketing programme Education Nation (Ots, 2019). Also, in recent years, more attention has been paid to the reputation of the teaching profession. Foundation Innove has initiated annual school satisfaction surveys in grades 4, 8, and 11 as well as among teachers and parents. In those surveys, a school's reputation is associated with overall satisfaction and being proud of one's school (Lukk et al., 2016), but the content and meaning of the term "reputation" is not

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1   Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu, Lossi 36, Tartu, 53001 Estonia;
     mari-liis.tikerperi@ut.ee

explained. In public discussions, some aspects of school reputation, such as the academic results, renovated buildings, famous alumni and active students are often referred to and described (Heinaru, 2016; Kasemägi, 2018; Kukin, 2018). All these approaches are quite different and do not explain the detail, or depth of the schools' reputation.

A reputation management scholar Sabrina Helm (2011) has analysed different definitions of reputation and indicated seven main characteristic elements of reputation: a) perceptual element, b) time perspective, c) stakeholder affiliation, d) reciprocity element, e) corporate performance, f) benefit or "customer" value element and g) competitive advantage.

Building on the existing body of knowledge, this paper aims to elaborate on these mapped elements of reputation by trying to describe and organise the specific aspects influencing schools' reputation. Given that reputation management is a part of general management and there are no common understandings and clearly measurable values in schools' reputation management strategies, the author decided to collect data by interviewing school leaders (N=19) from different Estonian basic and upper secondary schools. Transcribed interviews (470 pages) were analysed 1) inductively to find out how the principals describe school reputation and reputation management in general (RQ1) and then 2) deductively, to compare the aspects of school reputation, as described by principals, with theoretical definitions of reputation (RQ2). As a result, the author provides a framework for planning and managing reputation and communication in schools of general education by proposing different indicators that could help to specify an abstract notion. During the interviews, it was not considered important to measure the scope of the principals' theoretical knowledge about the topic, as the author was more interested in their reflections and experiences of different indicators enabling them to create the understanding about a school's reputation.

Results

The interviewed principals confirmed that schools are facing new demands and there is a growing need for professional and well-planned communication management. Most of the school leaders had felt more intensive public interest in their organisation and considered it essential to be visible, preferably about positive things. All the interviewed principals confirmed the importance of their interest groups, although they saw them in different positions and roles. In some schools some groups, for example parents or alumni, are involved in school's reputation management. In the schools, communication tasks are

given to various employees, such as study coordinators, development/project managers, activity leaders or certain teachers (besides the principal).

The most valuable findings of the study are different indicators (N=46; divided into seven categories according to Helm (2011)) which, based on the interviews, form the schools' reputation. For example, the principals believed the unity of "school-family" i.e. the number of different academic and free-time opportunities in school, close relationships with interest groups, cooperation with different firms and organisations, school's visual identity etc., to be essential (in addition to the aspects written above in the context of public discussion).

In addition to school-based indicators, also mentioned were some external aspects which may influence school's reputation, such as the imago of area and the principal's or teacher's personal reputation.

The main idea of exploring the indicators of school reputation was to offer more specific reputation-related aspects to simplify reputation management in schools. According to the interviewees most of the schools do not have the financial resources to hire communication professionals and consequently, reputation management is difficult. Those indicators can be seen as small inspiring tasks or aspects to follow, a checklist in reputation management. The principals did give some examples of activities performed with the main purpose of improving reputation but admitted that mostly, managing reputation is just a "side-effect" of everyday work.

To summarise, school's reputation is created by highlighting the school's achievements as well as recognising its failings, within the expectations of different stakeholders. However, while evaluating or trying to measure a school's reputation, it is essential to take into account the nature of school's main activities, the heterogeneity of parents as their main interest group, limited budget and different levels of communication skills.