

BULETINUL INSTITUTULUI POLITEHNIC DIN IAȘI
Publicat de
Universitatea Tehnică „Gheorghe Asachi” din Iași
Volumul 71 (75), Numărul 4, 2025
Secția
ȘTIINȚA ȘI INGINERIA MATERIALELOR

**RESEARCH ON THE MANAGEMENT OF THE
PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ROMANIA
IN THE CONDITIONS OF DECISIONAL AUTONOMY**

BY

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Received: August 24, 2025

Accepted for publication: September 19, 2025

Abstract. The aim of this research is the analysis of the decision-making process and its autonomy. As an integral part of the functional mechanisms of an organization, decision-making is a natural act of individuals, especially of managers. Experts have concluded that the act of generating a decision is the bearer of a strategy in which decision-making autonomy holds an important place. Highlighting the values of this managerial attribute involves providing answers related to a relevant segment of our research questions: 1) Within what managerial parameters can a new conceptual determination of decision-making be framed?; 2) To what extent could the model influence the course of the decision-making process, understood as a regulatory mechanism, and the stages of decision formulation?; 3) In what context is the relationship between decision ethics and decision-making autonomy highlighted? The answers lead to the formulation of pertinent conclusions that will contribute to the theoretical and scientific foundation of the research for the development of the doctoral thesis.

Keywords: management, decision, de-concentration, decision-making autonomy.

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1. Introduction

The stages of the study were structured as part of the research project entitled: *RESEARCH ON THE MANAGEMENT OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ROMANIA, IN THE CONTEXT OF DECISION-MAKING AUTONOMY*. From a thematic perspective, the title of the paper is in line with the directions set in the research project: 1) establishing a bibliographic framework regarding the autonomy of the decision-making process; 2) researching decision-making particularities in preschool institutions in correlation with decision-making autonomy; 3) a comparative study between public and private educational institutions by means of designing a correlational analysis model, together with setting comparison criteria (country – within the EU and the USA); 4) designing a model for improving decisions and expanding decision-making autonomy (designing, validating, potential implementation of the model, and establishing evaluation indicators).

For the first research direction, which is central to this study, the project includes a presentation of the most important aspects concerning decision-making and decision-making autonomy. Therefore, in this study, we will analyze the role of decision-making in the organizational change process, as well as the way in which ethical aspects influence the attempts to conceptualize and define managerial decision-making.

Educational management, defined by experts as the art and science of planning, directing, and managing the work of others to achieve the established goals, is above all a compound of constants: power, authority, and influence. To improve their quality, these must be brought together with the official decision-maker. In other words, to be able to make institutional decisions, the scope of a manager's autonomy is directly proportional to the outcome of an equation in which political-administrative terms, dependence on financial resources, legal limits, and ethical-moral provisions of the legislative framework all come into play – each, in turn, subject to decision-making. The **2015 report by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe** emphasized that: “efficient and sustainable mechanisms of dialogue, consultation and cooperation between civil society and authorities at all levels are expressly recognized as important mechanisms because they enable and ensure the participation of all individuals and groups in society in decision-making”.

The success, performance and competitiveness of any educational institution, including preschools, depend largely on management – on “the art of leadership” (Gerbier, 1993) – through the effective integration and coordination of resources with the purpose of achieving organizational goals (Daft, 2014; Hitt and Middlemist, 1988). From a decision-making perspective, the competitive advantage of an organization lies in its people and its leaders. In this context, it is well understood that organizational indicators include not only the efficiency of preschool management – through effective administration of material and

financial resources or the professionalism of teaching staff, but also, and especially, the trust level of parents and children, teachers and staff in a successful managerial team. This success is due, among other things, to the ability to optimize decisions.

1. *DECISION-MAKING*, in functional terms, is a regulatory mechanism in itself, which conceptually represents the conclusion of a process through which a conscious choice is made between two or more courses of action considered as available alternatives, necessary to achieve an objective (e.g., increasing the level of educational efficiency).

In today's society, in the context of changes in the field of education, managers are called upon to cultivate values, and to create and apply competencies through which the institutions they lead are supported in integrating into a constantly changing world. The competitive environment and the dynamic adaptation to the demands of modern didactics call for a new model of organization from a systematic perspective, a new form of piloting and strategic innovation. This new vision is closely related to the knowledge system a modern manager must possess, enabling them to effectively express their leadership competencies. These competencies are focused on anticipating or establishing a framework or a hypothetical model of action that is to be applied for the institution's development. Austrian theorist Thomas B. Greenfield (1989), a significant figure in the evolution of "scientific management", emphasized that organizations are made up of human beings and we cannot understand them without taking into account the individual beliefs and perceptions upon which decisions are made.

2. *THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS* is a mixture of approaches, activities and operations through which most of the necessary information (limitations, concrete situations) is gathered and processed, followed by determining the probable variables (alternatives, context, actors, etc.).

Depending on the objectives and the adopted strategies, after formulating and analyzing the criteria (development, profitability, autonomy) that outline the evaluation hypothesis, the optimal choice is made. Based on this choice, the decision is formulated and the application procedure is followed. According to American expert Herbert A. Simon (1997), "making managerial decisions is synonymous with the entire management process" – an assertion he also reflects schematically by condensing it functionally into three steps that describe the stages of the decision-making process (Fig. 1).

In the effort to develop and optimize decisions (with its entire mechanism that ensures the processual nature of organizing activities and evaluating efficiency, etc.), the constitutive reference points acquire notable defining valences through the conceptualization of this activity-process as a set of (ethical, moral) principles and norms that govern education at a principle level and regulate the managerial decision-making act.

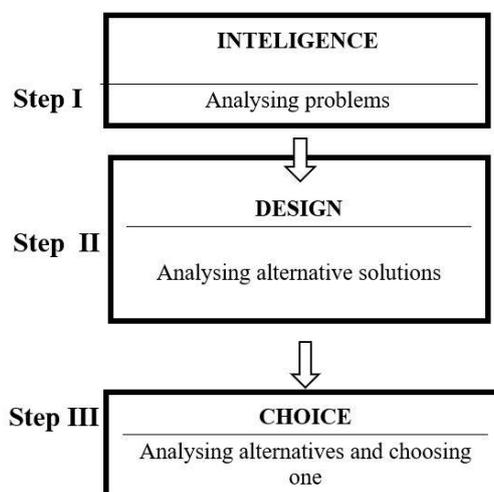


Fig. 1 – Simon A. Herbert's decision-making process.

3. *ETHICAL CODES* in this case have precisely the role of specifying the deontological norms and rules through which the (educational) institution can transpose into the behavior of its employees the system of values it aspires to. Therefore, for adequate functioning, from the very elaboration phase (starting with defining and classifying the problem, moving to the modeling stage – identifying, comparing, and evaluating viable alternatives – up to the selection stage), the decision must be, above all other criteria, ethical, based on the level of integrity of both the manager and the institution (Brinkmann and Ims, 2004). Thus, ethical behaviour in decision-making will set the imperative necessity of professionalising the manager through constant contact with theoretical resources and solid methodological argumentation (James, 1983).

Decision-making has also been defined as the solution adopted by a system (person, group, organisation, community) in order to solve a problem. Decisions are made at two levels: 1. choosing objectives, and 2. choosing the tasks that must be accomplished, taking into account values, motivations, concrete situations, and selecting the actions that must be carried out, in relation to the chosen task. Decision-making involves taking into account the probability and the utility of different outcomes (Richard, 1997). Two main approaches address the matter of decision-making: a) normative – which provide the logical and mathematical conditions for the correct decision, and b) empirical/behavioral – which seek to identify the real mechanisms used by analytical systems in decision-making (Fig. 2), since in some situations an option must be activated among several other options, without knowing the outcome of each, as it depends on a future event not yet performed.

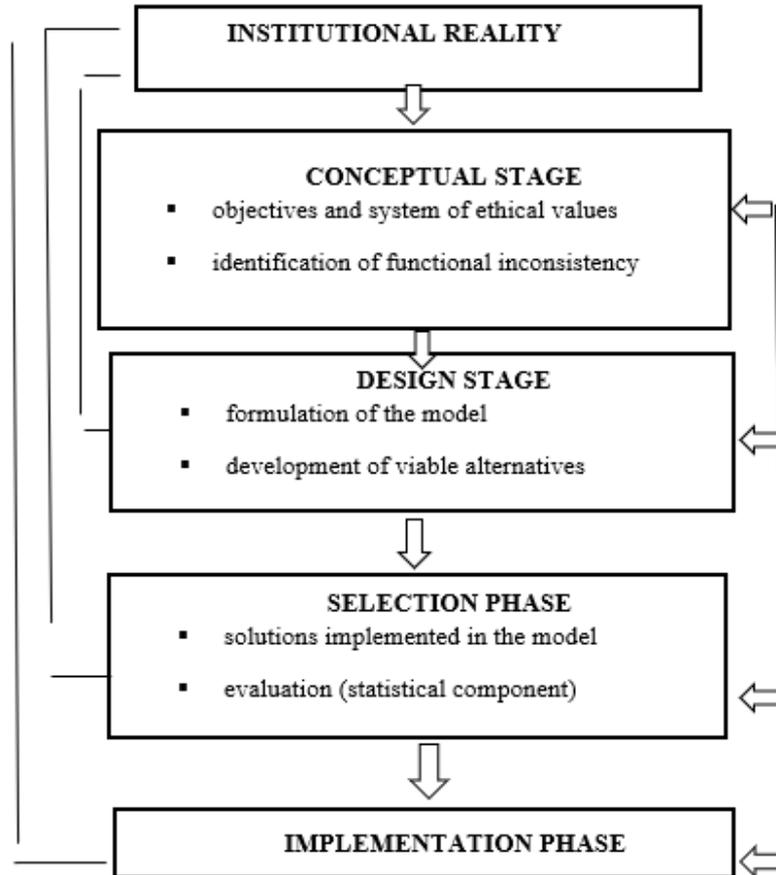


Fig. 2 – Decision-making phases.

Thus, decision-making raises two distinct yet largely interdependent issues: the issue of the necessary *knowledge* and that of *consensus*. Regarding the *issue of knowledge*, the fundamental difficulty stems from *uncertainty*. Only in exceptional cases does a decision-maker possess all the knowledge required for making a decision (the condition of certainty). Since, as a rule, the knowledge available is either *incomplete* or *uncertain*, the persistent uncertainty that cannot be reduced during the preparation process generates a situation in which managers face two types of problems: the first is related to knowing the methods of deciding under conditions of incomplete and fragile knowledge, while the second is connected to coping with the disorganizing consequences of uncertainty within the system for which the decision must be made.

In this case, probability represents the degree of confidence / lack of confidence in the manager's knowledge, the percentage of success attributed to

that knowledge, and the manager's willingness to perceive and describe reality correctly, knowing that in this model, the decision-making process is a rational, logical-mathematical processing of data, but which remains only a probabilistic processing. Therefore, it is assumed that the decision made must represent the solution which is most likely to be the best solution, based on the level of knowledge available at a given moment. If we remember that Chester I. Barnard published in 1936 an essay based on a lecture he had delivered at Princeton, entitled "*Mind in Everyday Affairs*", in which he emphasised the contrast between what he called "logical" and "non-logical" processes in decision-making, we should emphasise that the American specialist already spoke at that time about "the great divergence of opinion... regarding what constitutes an adequate intellectual basis for opinion or deliberate action." He stated: by "logical processes" I mean conscious thought that could be expressed in words or other symbols, that is, reasoning. By "non-logical processes" I mean those that cannot be expressed in words or as reactions, but are made known only through a decision, judgment, or action. According to scholars, Barnard's paper shows that managers, in contrast to the epistemic resources of management, often do not benefit from the most favorable context for making a decision on the basis of an ordered rational-comprehensive analysis (Lindgren, 1953), but instead depend to a large extent on intuitive responses to situations requiring urgent solutions (decisions). Numerous specialised studies, however, argue that under conditions of increased and persistent uncertainty, even this rational-probabilistic model of decision-making is often not applicable in practice. Systems in such situations of uncertainty resort to different decision-making methods, which is why Herbert A. Simon (1960) emphasised that social-human systems, under special conditions, adopt a simplified decision-making strategy, choosing the first satisfactory solution they manage to formulate.

4. *DECISIONAL AUTONOMY*, as a phenomenon, expresses a degree of freedom and deliberative capacity that cannot be influenced by external factors. From the moment a solution is chosen, after the deduction and identification of its consequences, its implementation leads – if successful – to the resolution of functional inconsistencies, or, on the contrary, to a return to problem analysis or to the modeling and design phase. Here we can discern a second aspect related to the principle of decisional autonomy. The high-performing manager has the ability to identify problems (Bush, 2011), to generate new ideas for solving these problems, to apply those ideas, and to deliver results. Such a profession signifies a system of physical, intellectual, moral and technological traits, specifically shaped for solving the given task, within one aspect of a field of activity: type of work, defined form of activity, system of specific requirements, rights and obligations, status and roles, indications and contraindications, norms of activity, evaluation and improvement, specific relationships and attitudes. In one of the dictionaries of communication theory (Watson and Hill, 1993), *the leader's revelation* - "*self-disclosure*" – is defined as the identity that a person projects

and for which he or she seeks to gain acceptance from others, in view of change. Within this general framework of a manager's profile, what becomes extremely important – given the challenges that decision-making entails – is the dynamic relationship to change, which the literature highlights as a survival solution through adaptation to the effects of globalisation, crises or legislative instability (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Huy, 2002; Burke, 2002). Considering the opportunities offered by the managerial autonomy, as well as the necessity to align with the evolution of a specific environment – or, at times, even to go beyond a certain stage through innovative vision – organizational change targets internal structures, improvement in the management of human and material resources, in decision-making (Ledford *et al.*, 1989), and in teaching processes and methodologies in this case.

Organisational change through decisions begins with its acceptance and implementation for the achievement of the desired objectives (Weick and Quin, 1999; Burns, 2005) and is performed by relying on one of the models – here, the classical Kurt Lewin model (Fig. 3).

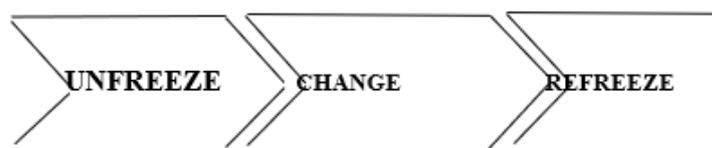


Fig. 3 – Kurt Lewin model (Source: <http://w\vw.change-management-consultant.com/Kurt-Levin.html>).

“The science of management, in its relation to the reality of the educational phenomenon, has only the boundaries that are established by the pedagogues who study it, which is why it exists within pedagogy and its branches to the extent that the educational act manifests itself as an act of management... Management problems are varied and controversial, but they are always framed within pedagogy and, in this sense, they serve as a theoretical and practical foundation for many branches of pedagogy” (Popescu, 1973). Decisional autonomy involves “taking responsibility for deciding, planning, and guiding the activities of people working towards a goal, so that the correct result should be both efficient and economical” (Iucu, 2000).

2. Conclusions

From the perspective of autonomy, the entire managerial activity can essentially be summarised as a chain of decisions, in the context of either restricted or expanded autonomy. The increasing complexity and diversity of the environment in which the public organization (kindergarten) operates

continuously generates problems whose resolution requires *making and implementing decisions*.

The limited nature of human, material, financial or informational resources implies a certain responsibility in achieving objectives according to the most advantageous conditions of allocation and utilisation. A decision is nothing more than the choice of one alternative among several possible alternatives. It is a matter of choice, where the degree of autonomy of the manager comes into play and ultimately constitutes an indicator of managerial competence.

Therefore, in response to the research questions and to achieve operational objectives, in this thesis we will attempt to develop a new reference system for the main functional decision-makers, aiming to align it with the procedures for increasing decisional autonomy, as a relevant scientific approach to enhancing the quality and performance of management, in line with contemporary postmodern European standards.

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CERCETĂRI PRIVIND MANAGEMENTUL
INSTITUȚIILOR DE ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNT PREȘCOLAR DIN ROMÂNIA
ÎN CONDIȚIILE AUTONOMIEI DECIZIONALE

(Rezumat)

Scopul acestei cercetări este analiza procesului decizional și a autonomiei acestuia. Ca parte integrantă a mecanismelor funcționale ale unei organizații, luarea deciziilor este un act natural al indivizilor, în special al managerilor. Experții au concluzionat că actul de generare a unei decizii este purtătorul unei strategii în care autonomia decizională ocupă un loc important. Evidențierea valorilor acestui atribut managerial implică oferirea de răspunsuri legate de un segment relevant al întrebărilor noastre de cercetare: 1) În ce parametri manageriali se poate încadra o nouă determinare conceptuală a luării deciziilor?; 2) În ce măsură ar putea modelul să influențeze cursul procesului decizional, înțeles ca mecanism de reglare, și etapele formulării deciziilor?; 3) În ce context este evidențiată relația dintre etica decizională și autonomia decizională? Răspunsurile conduc la formularea unor concluzii pertinente care vor contribui la fundamentarea teoretică și științifică a cercetării pentru dezvoltarea tezei de doctorat.