

Teachers' Attitudes to Education Transformation in Czech Schools

Abstract

The text deals with teachers' attitudes and opinions of the transformation of the Czech schools. It answers the following question: Which are the risky factors for current teachers to be able to adopt the concept of the integrated teaching process and to be able to get rid of residue of the encyclopaedic approach to the teaching process in Czech schools. Teachers' attitudes and their connection with reflection of their work and their self-reflection are defined briefly. The author describes research problems, questions, hypotheses and aims of the research realised in 20 schools in the city of Ostrava and its neighbourhood within the Research Project of our organisation named New Opportunities in Education of Teachers, Educators and Pupils for the Learning Society of the 21st Century (VZO CEZ: JOB/98: 174500001) during the years 2000– 2003. She interprets results of this research and conclusions following from it for the pedagogical practice.

Key words: *teachers' attitudes, risky factors for adoption of the Czech schools transformation, reflection of the teacher's work, self-reflection, research problems, questions and hypotheses, research aims, interpretation of research results, conclusions for pedagogical practice.*

1. Introduction

The transformation of Czech schools has been continuously advancing. On August 23, 2004, the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Physical Training (MEYPT) approved the fourth version of the draft Framework Educational Programme (cf. www.vuppraha.cz). This version states that only standards will be

binding for teachers all over the Czech Republic (= the pupils outputs), which means that the Programme will outline areas which should be mastered by pupils in individual periods of the primary school attendance. And it will be up to the capacity of individual schools to decide how to meet such standards (outputs). Every school will propose its own syllabus in its School Educational Programme (SEP). Headmasters should be offered a sample of a Manual for the preparation of the School Educational Programmes in October 2004. The Framework Educational Programme will take effect in all schools in the school year 2007/2008. The educational concept titled *Man and His World* which can become the basis of the integrated teaching process makes it possible to apply various alternatives how to define the study subjects scope at the level of SEP.

The concept of the pre-service teacher education for primary schools at the Teacher Training College of Ostrava University, preparing young teachers for the application of the Framework Educational Programme and School Educational Programmes, was elaborated according to the outputs of the research project named “New Opportunities in Education of Teachers, Educators and Pupils for the Learning Society of the 21st Century“ (VZO CEZ: JOB/98: 174500001), with the Head Project Researcher, Mrs. Hana Lukášová, the Head of the Department of Pedagogy for Primary and Alternative Education (cf. Kantorková, 2000; Lukášová-Kantorková, 2003).

It is the teacher’s personality which plays the key role in the Czech schools transformation. What is teachers’ attitude to the transformation of Czech schools and to the integrated teaching process? What risky factors are there for current teachers to be able to adopt the concept of the integrated teaching process and to be able to get rid of residue of the encyclopaedic approach to the teaching process in Czech schools?

I will try to provide answers through results of the Research Project of our organisation conducted in 500 schools in the city of Ostrava and its neighbourhood in the years 2000–2002 (cf. Šimíčková, 2000, 2003).

Just like in other branches, the teacher profession, too, can be divided into a couple of development phases. The first year of the school practice is usually considered as a key period for the teacher to build his/her professional skills (with the impact of the reality shock, professional shock, many teachers realise their limited preparedness for practice, many of them do mind that there is a lack of equipment and fittings at schools, etc.).

The school culture and its complex atmosphere are very important for the acceptance of a young teacher. When comparing problems of teachers starting their professional carrier in the CR and abroad, they have much in common (cf. Průcha, 2001, page 27).

A teacher becomes a real professional (cf. Průcha: a teacher- an expert) after some five years or longer experience. For the final phase of the teacher career there is a frequently used term of a “burnt-out” teacher.

What is typical of such a teacher group is the so-called “teacher burnout syndrome” described in the works by some psychologists like C. Kyriaca, G. Keller and C Hennig, S. W Paine and others. Are senior Czech teachers professionally “burnt-out” or are they excited about their profession just like at the beginning? According to the authors of individual research tasks it is desirable to connect the diagnostics of the burnout syndrome more with the assessment of the life style of individual teachers (Průcha, 2001 p. 28).

One key aspect of the teacher way of thinking and behaviour has not been described well in the CR, yet, which is the teachers' approach to changes and reforms in the current Czech schooling system and their behaviour during the current fundamental transformation of society in the CR (Průcha, 2001, pages 46–48).

2. Teacher's approaches and self-esteem in the role of a teacher

A pedagogical dictionary characterizes the approach to school as a complex relationship of individuals or groups to the school as an institution. It is based on the subjective evaluation of the school, compared to needs and interests of people who come into contact with the school. What is important are attitudes of pupils, parents, attitudes of teachers and specialists and attitudes of politicians, as well (cf. Průcha, Mareš, Walterová, 1998, page 181).

Teachers' attitudes are closely related to their own reflection and self-reflection. Anybody who wants to work in a more efficient way should be able to evaluate his/her activities and experience and should be able to think about why he/she is successful or not.

The Pedagogical Dictionary (Průcha, Mareš, Walterová, 1995, page 196) provides the following definition of the term self-reflection:

Self-reflection – an individual's general self-consideration, perception of his/her own personality, looking back at his/her deeds, thoughts, attitudes, emotions, recapitulation of a certain section of his/her own life or behaviour and decision-making in situations which an individual considers as important. The aim is to evaluate him/herself and make a decision on what to change and how, and to select a strategy for the future.

In a pedagogical context we mainly have in mind the self-reflection of teachers. It covers a couple of phases: recalling of the situation, description and analysis

of its key elements, evaluation or re-evaluation, justification ways, decision adoption, setting up of a further strategy.

Professional self-reflection of a teacher (regardless of whether a beginner or an experienced one) is a pre-requisite for his/her professional growth, his/her pedagogical competence and his/her responsibility as a professional and a human being.

Within such a pedagogical context we can understand self-reflection as pedagogical competence or, in other words, as a pre-requisite for the professional development of students and teachers, as an inner process which helps them to realise their behaviour, way of thinking, views, attitudes and also as the understanding of unintentional contents of our mind, e.g. as an inner dialogue (Švec, 1999, page 72).

The research project conducted by the Department of Pedagogy for Primary and Alternative Education applies the pedagogical-reflective model (represented by H. Lukášová- Kantorková), the theoretical assumption of which rests in the holistic approach, to humanistic pedagogy and the theory of professional identity. The model rests in the follow up of the change in roles (a student of pedagogy becomes a teacher, a beginner teacher becomes a teacher-expert) through situational reflections, looking for the personal and professional identity, co-operation, pedagogical creativity and practice and it reflects individual approaches (cf. the works by H. Kantorková-Lukášová, 2000, wider self-interpretation 2003 and miscellanies published and paid within the above-mentioned research project in the years 1998–2004).

There is a serious question then, whether Czech teachers in the current society are able to adopt and apply such approaches to their work ones, ones which are so much different from those applied before the year 1989 (directive-based, authoritative approaches, etc.). And the research should provide an answer to the above question (see below).

3. The research itself

3.1 Research objectives, issues and hypotheses

The research objective was to identify teachers' attitudes to the integrated teaching process. The point was not to criticise and assess the work of elementary school teachers but to reflect their opinions on the integration of curriculum in individual subjects and their attitudes to the integration and changed teaching methods in the elementary school.

Basing on the current findings on teachers' attitudes to their own work which can influence the transformation of the whole school and on current knowledge of the professional development of a teacher (cf. Průcha, 2001), I outlined the main research issues:

1. How do the teachers' attitudes to changing teaching methods depend on the length of their professional experience?
2. What is the influence of school atmosphere (including the attitudes of a headmaster) on the change in teaching methods of the current elementary school?

Research hypotheses:

H1: The longer the teacher's pedagogical experience is, the more conservative are his/her attitudes to the transformation of Czech schools and opinions on teaching methods which should be applied.

H1a: The older the teachers, the more inclined they are to stereotypes in their work.

H1b: Teachers with longer pedagogical experience are not critical enough to their mistakes.

H1c: Teachers with longer pedagogical experience do not like to verify new, integrated procedures.

H2: The school atmosphere as a whole influences the attitudes and opinions of teachers on the teaching methods innovation.

3.2 Description of the investigated sample

We had 398 respondents participating in the research, out of which 202 (50.75 %) from 20 elementary schools in Ostrava, 162 (40.70 %) from 20 fully organized schools outside Ostrava and only 34 respondents (8.54%) from 10 incomplete schools with a small number of classes. The smaller number of such schools and also smaller number of respondents is due to the current trends in society, namely the economic ones which have an impact on such schools operation.

The age structure of the investigated sample was represented by 101 teachers with the teaching experience shorter than 5 years (25.70%), 58 teachers with the teaching experience shorter than 10 years (14.76%), 91 teachers with the teaching experience of less than 20 years (23.16%) and 148 teachers with the teaching experience longer than 20 years (36.39%).

In non-complete schools with a low number of grades there were 11 participating teachers (32.34%) with the teaching experience under 5 years, 4 teachers (11.76%) with the experience under 10 years, 7 teachers (20.58%) under 20 years and 12 teachers (35.28%) with the teaching experience over 20 years.

In fully organized schools outside Ostrava (in the Moravia-Silesia region) there were 48 research participants with the experience shorter than 5 years (30.62%), 31 teachers with the experience shorter than 10 years (20.14%), 34 teachers with the experience under 20 years and 49 teachers with the experience longer than 20 years (28.78%).

In elementary schools in Ostrava there were the following numbers of teachers participating in the research: 42 teachers with the experience shorter than 5 years (20.79%), 23 teachers shorter than 10 years (11.41%), 50 teachers shorter than 20 years (24, 86%) and 87 teachers with the longest pedagogical experience over 20 years (42.68%). Thus the number of teachers with the longest experience is highest in elementary schools in Ostrava.

3.3 Methods for the investigation of teachers' attitudes

In the first part of the research I used an anonymous, non-standardized questionnaire with the offer of 17 'closed' answers, with the option of four potential answers. I elaborated a questionnaire for the investigation research in an ad hoc way, to be able to conduct a nominal classification (Chráska, 1998).

In the second part I tried to identify opinions and attitudes according to the Likert-type scale (Chráska, 1998).

I tried to arrange the statements for scaling with regard to all areas of the integrated teaching process, though most of them covered elementary teaching, national history and geography and natural study (formerly life and institutions), which correlates with the current practice at Czech schools.

Having reflected pedagogical phenomena at the level of nominal measurement, the most frequently applied method appears to be the x-square test (chi-square test) which ranks among the non-parametric, statistical significance tests (Chráska, 1998, p. 163). By means of that test we are able to distinguish whether frequencies which were acquired by measurements of pedagogical reality are significantly different from theoretical frequencies which correspond with the given zero hypothesis.

The statistical hypothesis (called as an alternative hypothesis) is not verified by means of the statistical significance test itself but always against (compared) another statement - typically against the so-called zero hypothesis. The zero hypothesis is a speculation which, by means of statistical terms, states that there is no relationship between investigated variables (Chráska, 1998, p. 158)

For instance, there is no dependence of the teachers' age on their attitudes to the transformation of the Czech school.

The critical value for the acceptance or rejection of the zero hypothesis $\alpha = 0.05$. If the calculated absolute value of the test criterion is higher or equal to the critical

value ($-p > \alpha$), we reject the zero hypothesis and state that the research result is statistically significant. If the calculated absolute value is lower than the critical value ($p < \alpha$), then there is a situation which we expected on condition of the zero hypothesis, the results can be random and the zero hypothesis cannot be rejected.

H₀ (zero hypothesis) for the application of the x-square test of good compliance in this research:

There is no disparity between the length of the pedagogical experience of teachers and their attitudes to the teaching process integration.

H_A (alternative hypothesis): There are significant disparities between the length of the teachers' pedagogical **experience** and their attitudes to the teaching process integration.

Significance measuring by means of the x-square test was conducted at the IT Department of the Nature Science College of Ostrava University, by means of the test Hintze, J., NCSS and PASS, Number Cruncher Statistical Systems. Kaysville, Utah: www.NCSS.COM. 2001.

3.4 Interpretation of results

Further interpretation of the collected research data will be conducted according to the following analysis:

1. What is the level of self-reflection of the above-mentioned teachers, with respect to their work as primary school teachers?

We can match this factor with the answers to the following questions:

What are teachers' attitudes to their work?

What is the way they get prepared for the teaching process?

What is teachers' perception of their work, with respect to their personal growth?

What are their attitudes to the post-graduate education?

What do they consider as beneficial for their work with respect to the curriculum planning?

What is the way teachers evaluate their own personality, with respect to their professional skills?

H₁ was confirmed only in 32% of the cases. The experience length of individual teachers does not play a key role in the self-reflection of their work.

2. How do teachers reflect the current curriculum and organisational conditions for their work?

This category will include answers to the following questions:

What attitudes towards current syllabus do teachers adopt?

What organisational forms of work do teachers prefer in the teaching process?
What do teachers think about current standards?

What attitudes towards the exact timetable do teachers adopt?

H1 has been confirmed in 50% of the cases. The length of teachers' experience cannot be considered as an essential criterion for the reflection of curricular and organisational conditions at the current Czech school.

3. To what extent does the school atmosphere as a whole influence teachers' attitudes to their work?

Teachers expressed their attitudes by selecting answers to the following questions:

What are the organisational conditions for the work of elementary school teachers?

What is the co-operation of teachers in a certain school like?

What do teachers think about the management style at their school?

How would they evaluate the work of their superiors?

What do teachers think about the evaluation of their own work by the school management?

H1 and H2 have been confirmed in 88% of the cases. Disparities in the pedagogical experience length had significant impact on the evaluation of the school atmosphere as a whole.

4. What attitudes do teachers adopt with respect to the current school standards?

H1 was accepted in 80% of the cases. The pedagogical experience length is of key importance when evaluating (assessing) teachers' attitudes to the current Czech school standards (before the Framework Educational Programme is passed).

5. What do teachers think about the way the school should develop the child's personality with respect to the learning process?

H1 was confirmed in 75% of the cases. When evaluating the teachers' attitudes to the way the current school should develop the child's personality, with respect to the learning process, we have discovered essential disparities dependent on the pedagogical experience length.

6. What attitudes do teachers adopt with respect to elementary teaching, natural study and national history and geography (formerly life and institutions)?

H1 was confirmed in 68% of the cases. There are disparities (though not significant) in the teachers' attitudes towards elementary teaching, natural study

and national history and geography, depending on their pedagogical experience length.

7. What attitudes do teachers adopt with respect to the integration of individual study subjects – e.g. to the synthetisation of the curriculum?

H1 has been confirmed in 88% of the cases. There are significant disparities in the teachers' attitudes to the curriculum integration, depending on the teaching experience length.

8. What is the level of teachers' self-reflection with respect to the integrated teaching process?

H1 has been confirmed in 58% of the cases only. When evaluating the teachers' self-reflection with respect to the teacher experience length, what has been discovered is that the experience length is of lower significance. Even teachers with longer pedagogical experience can adopt a positive attitude to the integrated teaching process.

When evaluating the statements by means of the Likert-type scale, the alternative hypothesis was accepted in the case of the evaluation of 21 statements, which is approximately 70% and rejected in 9 cases – approx. 30 %.

When evaluating the statements provided in the questionnaires, statistically significant disparities according to the length of pedagogical experience were identified (accepted) in 12 cases – 60% and rejected in 8 cases – 40% (cf. Šimíčková, 2003).

4. Conclusion – recommendations

The research results interpretation has not shown 100% validity of the hypothesis stating that the longer the teachers' pedagogical experience is, the more conservative are their attitudes to the transformation of the Czech school and opinions on the teaching methods, either; in spite of that we must take into account with some risky factors in the process of the Czech school transformation.

When evaluating the individual cases we should respect the individuality of teachers' personalities. In the future it would be desirable to combine the method of quantitative and qualitative research (mixed methodology) and deal with the processing and analysis of the teacher's life story (Gavora, 2001) in a couple of cases of teachers who have not succumbed to the Teacher Burnout Syndrome and in spite of older age and long pedagogical experience they are still able to develop.

What will have to be done for the primary school teachers, to be able to implement the school transformation by means of the Framework Educational Programme and its adoption?

We should realise that the teachers' age and their pedagogical experience length represent significant factors for the acceptance of transformation and innovations in the Czech school. From the research results and the 30-year long experience as a primary school teacher I know that most teachers with longer experience succumb to work stereotype and it is very difficult for them to cope with new teaching procedures. Many of them need further theoretical study and are lacking in the capacity to absorb the change process.

The research results show that the school atmosphere as a whole has a significant impact on the acceptance of the integrated teaching process. As the headmasters are managers of pedagogical teams which will adopt the Framework Educational Programme and by implementing it they will build the autonomy of their school, it is necessary to include the integrated teaching process and its issues in the post-graduate education, namely for headmasters.

Headmasters as managers in institutions with the statute of a legal entity are also bound to establish good conditions for the implementation of innovative trends and methods in the system of work at their schools. It means to establish the school atmosphere in which also young Teacher Training College graduates can get on, namely in elementary schools; and based on their own experience they should implement the integrated teaching process and the project-based method in their daily school work, as they are trained in the pre-service education provided by our Department. We often meet our students who already work as teachers and we hear many complaints regarding the misunderstanding of their teaching procedures which are so different from those adopted by most of the teaching staff. Therefore we recommend that headmasters to consider this problem.

Headmasters should show their opinion more openly and provide more support to innovative changes.

The integrated teaching issues should be included into the further teacher education programmes.

All pedagogical innovations should also be supported and positively evaluated by the Czech School Inspection. That will be necessary to amend the legislation relating to its role in performance evaluation of individual schools. It would be desirable so that an 'inspector – a white collar' becomes an 'inspector – a promoter' of the transformation concept for Czech schools and the Framework Educational Programme, as well.

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