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The Concept of Quality in Education, Quality of School in the Context of Decentralised School System

Abstract

The article discusses changes in education management methods over the past decades on a Europe wide scale, a process of finding a balance between autonomy for schools and teachers on the one hand and the responsibilities of the government and public authorities on the other. Particular attention will be paid to the situation in post communist countries, where given the tradition of a strongly centralised education system, finding such a balanced is a very complicated problem. In decentralised education with broad autonomy for schools, there is a greater importance placed on external evaluation, systematic monitoring and the assessment of schools. This however assumes precisely defined assessment criteria, that is, the concepts of quality in education, good quality, effective, good school.

To date, an accord has not been reached in the Czech Republic (between politicians, specialists and the public) on what is a good quality, good school, which is a serious obstacle to the internal transformation of schools. Empirical research is currently underway, which it is hoped shall contribute to the solution of the question – What is a good quality, good school? By which attributes can it be identified? Which attributes or characteristics will be considered key to the concept of a good quality, good school? What types of research instruments are best suited to investigate the quality of schools? The indicators of a good quality, good, effective school and the possibilities for their verification, are being investigated with an emphasis on the procedural approach –investigating education processes at a specific class level.

The article presents selected research results, in particular those related to the verification of suitable research instruments (questioning techniques and especially

monitoring real tuition) in the case study of one school. The possibilities and limits of quantitative and qualitative methods in determining the quality of schools are discussed.

The Concept of Quality in Education, Quality of School in the Context of Decentralised School System

In all countries of the European Union the quality of education is considered to be the highest political priority. It is generally accepted as the key condition for active citizenship, employment and social cohesion. In the context of free movement of labour force within the European Union, the importance of high-quality education keeps growing.

The quality of education, the quality of schools is also in the centre of attention of pedagogical theory and research. The goals of education are the basic frame work of reference for the evaluation of the quality of schools. A school which is successful in implementing these goals is considered to be a high-quality school. The concept of a high-quality good school is dynamic and changes in time and in various cultural and social contexts. Is the concept of a high-quality good school from the time of 30, 50, 100 years ago completely different from the present-day concept? How important is the social and cultural context for the conception of quality in education and high-quality schools at present? Is there a generally valid concept (or at least common and predominant features) in the broader European context?

Though the concept of quality of education, of schools is significantly connected with the national level, with the concept of educational policy of a specific country, in particular with the concept of the goals of education, of key values and of specific priorities, it is possible to see a considerable agreement in the views concerning the key characteristics and features which are decisive for high-quality effective schools. A number of research projects (in particular OECD projects and projects of CERI – Centre for Educational Research and Innovation) gave rise to models presenting and providing a deeper explanation of the factors, which are the basic conditions for high-quality functioning and high-quality results of schools (Hopkins 1987, Purkey-Smith 1983, Mortimore 1989, Sheerens 1996, OECD 1989, 1992, 1995). One of the latest joint projects, whose aim is to identify the key factors suitable for the evaluation of quality of schools on an all-European scale, is the "European Report on Quality of School Education" from 2000, which is a result of the work of experts from 27 European countries under the auspices of the European Commission.

The solution to the problem of quality of education changes and of its evaluation significantly in connection with the current processes of decentralisation of the school system. In the last 20 years, a conspicuous strengthening of the autonomy of schools, an increased responsibility for the quality of education at the level of schools, in some cases even at the classroom level, can be seen in most of the European educational systems. Though the extent of decentralisation of the school system in the individual countries of the European Union varies, there is a strong trend to transfer the decision-making authority from the state level to the school level. This political strategy is a result of mistrust in the ability of the state to react adequately to the specific requirements and to the local conditions of the individual schools.

It has been argued that those most concerned with the outcome of a decision are in the best position to take decisions, which most directly affect them. Empowering stakeholders at lower levels means making them responsible for defining what they understand by quality in education and giving them "ownership" of their part in the educational system. The decentralisation of the educational system leads to greater differences in standards among schools. The policy challenge is to acknowledge that these differences exist, and to ensure that differences are turned to opportunities and that they do not hinder pupils in achieving their full potential.

While centralised school systems prescribe and control particulary the education inputs (curriculum, form, content, etc.) and deal less with monitoring and control of the outputs, decentralised systems emphasise the control of the education output. In a decentralised school system with broad autonomy of schools, the importance of external evaluation, of systematic monitoring and evaluation of the activity of schools is ever greater. That requires not only a rigorous definition of the concepts of quality in education, of high-quality schools including a specification of concrete criteria for quality evaluation, but also the creation of suitable evaluation instruments.

An important and very complicated task is establishing a balance between external and internal evaluation of schools. The system of external evaluation is especially aimed at the evaluation of the results of education, in particular at those elements of education, which can be easily measured and compared. The most frequently used instrument of external evaluation is testing, which mainly determines the immediate performance of pupils in the form a number of remembered facts and understanding the facts, in the form of pupils skills to apply them and the like. It is less frequent that tests determine the level of development of higher levels of thought, such as analysis, synthesis, forming one's own value judgements and attitudes including the skill of arguing. Then such valuable elements of education, as co-operative skills, social skills, attitudes, values and the like are completely neglected.

The system of internal evaluation (self-evaluation) of schools – on the other hand, aims at monitoring the processes of education, at the quality of functioning of schools from the point of view of the atmosphere at school, the quality of inter-personal relations, the approach to children, parents and social partners of schools, from the point of view of strategies of teaching and of the quality of the pupils' learning processes and the like. In the centre of attention of internal evaluation of schools are the long-term effects of education, which are individualised, concerned with quality, and therefore difficult to measure and compare.

In the context of changing roles and functions of schools (e.g. conspicuous strengthening of the social function of schools) and also of changing goals of education (by now already a classical formulation of 4 linchpins, key goals of education for the 21st century – learning to acquire knowledge, learning to act, learning to live jointly with others, learning to be - in Delors 1996), there is an increasing demand to find balance between the evaluation of the results of school education – the product of education – and the evaluation of the processes of education.

Reaching many valuable goals of education, development of personality and social qualities of pupils, formation of attitudes, values, interests, and motivation to gain knowledge is a long-term question, and as results of education they practically do not yield to exact measurement and comparison (cf. the above-mentioned linchpins of education). Decisive for a cultivation of these dimensions is the quality of the processes of education – the character of the processes of learning, the quality of social communication and of the atmosphere in the classroom, the manners of evaluation and motivation of pupils, the rules of behaviour in a broader context of values, the ethos and the atmosphere of a school, the level of interpersonal relations, i.e. the so-called hidden curriculum.

If the dominant element among the criteria for evaluation of schools quality (or of the school system as a whole) is orientation on the results, while among the evaluation instruments it is the method of testing, there is a risk that schools will make effort to achieve good results at any cost, even at the expense of the quality of the processes, which in a long-term perspective can affect negatively the development of the child and the quality of his/her personality development (e.g. excessive rivalry and lack of collaboration among children, bad social relations, insufficient internal motivation for learning and the like). As an example for consideration in this respect we can mention one of the results brought by the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) performed in the Czech Republic in 1995. By their performance in the international comparative research, Czech pupils of the 8th grades of the basic school obtained the 6th place in mathematics and the 2nd place in natural sciences in a total of 43 countries. At

the same time, however, they obtained the 1st place among all tested countries from the point of view of the number of pupils who have a very negative attitude to the tested disciplines (50% in the case of mathematics, 56% in the case of physics and chemistry). How to evaluate such a result of basic education? Which is more important – the attitude to a particular subject and the motivation for a further education in this sphere or the achieved output within a specific time?

Now let us devote some more consideration to the situation of the Czech Republic, which is also characteristic of some other post-communist countries, where with regard to the tradition of highly centralised school systems, finding balance between autonomy of schools and teachers on the one hand and responsibility of the state and public bodies on the other hand appears to be a complicated problem. Let us especially concentrate on the changes in the concept of a high-quality education, high-quality school in the process of transformation of Czech schools after the fall of the communist regime in the year 1989, which from the point of view of management represents a transition from a strongly centralised to a decentralised school system.

The reaction to the uniformity and strong centralisation of the school system was an aversion to formulating generally valid principles and universal solutions, an aversion to planning and to a certain extent to educational policy in general. The reaction to a strong ideological pressure on schools, to the insistence that there is only one correct concept of education and school, to the pressure on a detailed and strictly binding specification of goals, contents and sometimes even methods of teaching, was an effort to achieve the greatest possible variety of educational paths and a plurality of educational goals relying on the argument that in postmodern times it is not possible to agree on a single correct solution, to define and mediate a universally valid value system and a concrete form of high-quality education.

With regard to the absence of educational policy in the form of basic principles of transformation of the school system, the beginning of the 1990s was essentially a period of spontaneous development, unsystematic and often antagonistic changes. It was also a period of considerably liberal approaches, particularly in some spheres – e.g. new secondary schools and private schools arose practically without control, the monopoly of the state on publishing textbooks was replaced by a completely unregulated production of textbooks of variable quality. Thus, one of the greatest complications in the process of transformation of the Czech school system was the fact that it required 10 years for a coherent concept to arise and to be officially accepted – why, in which direction, how and with what temporal perspective should our school system develop. It was only in the year 2000 that a National programme of the development of education in the Czech Republic arose, the so-called White

Paper (approved by the Government of the Czech Republic at the beginning of 2001), which unequivocally formulated the basic point of departure of the transformation of the school system and became a basis for the preparation of a new Education Act. Among other things it specifies the concept of quality in education, quality of schools in the form of a desirable state which is to be achieved.

It must be emphasised that in the context of development of the Czech school system in the last decades, there should be a principal change in the concept of education, in the concept of functions and key goals of schools, in the concept of high-quality school teaching and of strategies of learning. On the one hand, this particularly involves overcoming the exaggerated accentuation of mediating a great amount of knowledge, which should be learnt by heart, while on the other hand neglecting the cultivation of competence, attitudes, values and general personality development of children.

A new paradigm of education may well be represented by a quotation from one of the best known Czech writers K. Čapek: "Education is what remains to us when we forget everything we leanrt at school."

What remains to us is the following: developed thinking processes, critical thought, key life skills – solving of problems, co-operation, working with information, communicative skills, motivation for further education, self-confidence, values, attitudes …

What is usually forgotten is the following: facts, isolated information, stuff memorised without understanding, without understanding the relations, without skills to use it for a solution to practical situations, to analyse or synthesise them …

The mentioned concept of education emphasises a versatile cultivation of personality qualities, attitudes, values, skills, i.e. long-term effects of education, which are difficult to measure as results (outputs, products) at a particular moment of the educational path. But together with the effort to implement a new paradigm in the life of schools in connection with the process of decentralisation of the school system, a system of external evaluation of the results of education starts to develop. Tests are developed (e.g. preparation of a state school-leaving examination), which measure especially the immediate output of the pupils often only in the form of the amount of memorised knowledge and especially those elements of education, which may be easily measured. This results in a paradox, because the system of external evaluation in the present form strengthens those phenomena in our school system, which we intend to overcome.

In this sphere the Czech pedagogical research has two urgent tasks:

1. Contributing to the cultivation of methods and techniques of evaluation of the results of education.

2. Creating techniques of evaluation of the quality of the processes of education and testing them in research.

In connection with the White Book an extensive research project is implemented by the Pedagogical Faculty in Prague – "Development of National Education and of Teacher Training in the European Context". A component part of this project is the research for which I am responsible and whose aim is to contribute to the formulation of the concept of a high-quality good school in the context of the Czech school system, to specify the criteria, the indicators of quality and to test suitable evaluation instruments.

The basic sources for the creation of the concept of a good high-quality school were the following analyses of:

- foreign theoretical approaches and relevant research, on whose basis arose models of a high-quality effective school (OECD projects, projects of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation and the like.)
- educational political documents (common trends and principles of educational policy in European countries, curricular materials)
- evaluation criteria used by inspection bodies and in annual reports of the Czech school inspection
- projects of evaluation of various innovative and alternative models of teaching
- the existing instruments of evaluation of teaching (aiming at selected aspects, e.g. evaluation of communication in the classroom, openness of teaching, the social atmosphere in the classroom).

The concept of a high-quality school should include indicators of quality of the inputs, the conditions (e.g. material equipment of schools, school staff and quality of the teaching staff), further the indicators of the quality of the process of education and of functioning of schools (management of schools, atmosphere of schools, quality of the learning processes and the like) and also of the quality of the results of education (not only immediate and easily measurable knowledge, but also long-term effects of education, which are difficult to measure, such as skills, attitudes, values, interests, pupils' properties from the point of view of personality and social development).

The concept of a high-quality school adopted as a point of departure of our research emphasises particularly the functioning of schools and the educational processes, whose quality is decisive for the cultivation of values, which are the priorities of the newly adopted conception of education (key life skills, attitudes, values – cf. "Delors'" 4 linchpins of education for the 21st century).

The concept of a high-quality school includes the following features, which may further be subdivided into sub-features:

- clear **philosophy of school**
  - elaborated vision, determining specific goals and their hierarchy
  - wholesome system of school values (a concept of education emphasising the personality and social development of pupils, inclusive education, striving for individual approach with the aim to achieve the personal maximum with each and every child, a contented child, who likes going to school and is motivated to acquire knowledge, learning – as one of the key values and the like.)
  - high degree of teachers' identification with the philosophy of school and sharing common values
  - teachers' and other schools partners' participation in school projects
- high-quality **system of school management**
  - long-term plan of development of schools, a systematic approach to the improvement of schools quality
  - participative style of management, dividing the managerial functions, establishing teams, delegating powers and responsibilities, confidence in teachers
  - creation of school curricula under joint participation of teachers, parents, pupils and other social partners
  - forming a high-quality teaching staff, targeted selection of teachers, transparent criteria of teachers evaluation - motivating and rewarding professional development of teachers, systematic programme of professional development of the teaching staff
  - support of co-operation between teachers (joint projects, teaching in teams, mutual sitting in on classes and the like), care for the general atmosphere in schools
  - openness of schools in relation to parents and other partners of schools, participation of schools in community life and the like.
  - emphasising continuous self-evaluation of schools on the basis clear criteria
- high-quality **teaching staff**
  - professionalism of teachers (respective competence), personality qualities
  - high degree of engagement in the profession, enthusiasm for the work with children
  - open, flexible teachers, who enjoy testing new methods, approaches, forms of work, and who continue their own education
  - co-operation between teachers, good interpersonal relations
  - co-operation with parents and other partners of schools
  - identification of the teachers with their schools

- prevailing progressive **didactic conception of teaching within schools**
  - goals of school education formulated with an accent on a balanced personality development of children (rational, emotional, social, volitional, aesthetic, physical) and on cultivation of skills, competence, knowledge, attitudes, values and the like.
  - positive approach to pupils (respect, understanding), non-directive, partnership communication between teachers and pupils, positive atmosphere in the classroom based on confidence, safety, mutual respect and tolerance, emphasis on children's free, authentic expression, but also responsibility of children, internal discipline, order, clear rules in the classroom and the like.
  - methods and organisation of teaching – socio-constructivist concept of teaching (the teacher does not present ready-made knowledge, but creates teaching situations, in which children search and work independently or in a group with various sources of information, investigate, obtain results on their own), there is a majority of open questions, a support for a critical and independent thought, orientation on higher levels of thought, emphasis on internal motivation of pupils' learning, integration of the contents of the subject matter, co-operative forms of learning, individualisation of teaching
  - manner of evaluation of pupils – qualitative, diagnostic, intervening, on the basis of an individual reference norm, positive approach to pupils' mistakes, emphasis on mutual evaluation of pupils and on self-evaluation, making use of a portfolio for evaluation of pupils
  - co-operation with parents – parents as partners in the solution of common problems, possibility to influence both the work of the classroom and of the school, involvement of parents in the teaching process

Authenticity of schools

Statements of the director, teachers, and pupils on the goals and processes of education in the respective school and results of observation of the processes of education and of functioning of schools show a high degree of agreement.

The basic method of investigation of the evaluation instruments for the assessment of the quality of schools was the method of a case study, which was implemented at 3 basic schools. In the course of one week each school was investigated in a complex manner by a team of 15–20 researchers. The basic methods were observation of real teaching, discussions and questionnaires, and analysis of school documentation. Four types of questionnaires were presented – to parents, teachers, pupils and the director – to find out their views on selected spheres corresponding to the individual signs of high-quality schools, of course in a form corresponding

to the different groups of respondents. An important aim was creating as close links as possible between the theoretical concept of a good school and the concrete questions in the questionnaire. In each school, questionnaires were presented to the director and their deputy, to all teachers, to pupils of the 8 grades and to their parents (a total of about 200 pupils and 200 parents). The questionnaires contained 13–27 closed and open questions (the smallest number to pupils, the greatest number to the directors).

Another key method was observation of real teaching in selected classrooms. The object of the observation was the didactic conception of teaching in the whole school and the life of the school out of the teaching process (during breaks, in the canteen, in after-school clubs the atmosphere of the school, the level of social relations in the whole school, decoration of the school and the like). The criteria of the observation of teaching were derived from the concept of high-quality schools, from the section concerning the didactic conception of teaching.

Six dominant criteria were set (approach to the pupils, communication between the teacher and the pupils and among pupils, the atmosphere of the classroom, methods and organisation of work, the manner of evaluation of pupils), which were further specified in detail. For example, concerning the description of the atmosphere in the classroom from the emotional, social, working point of view, key words were offered for the description of communication, type of communication – vertical, horizontal, balance of interactions between the teacher and the pupils, proportion between the verbal activity of the teacher and of all pupils together, the character of the questions, the quality of non-verbal communication and the like. A special category was also created – a description of the solution to specific "conspicuous" pedagogical situations in the classroom.

The observation was performed by 3 observers, who spent a whole day in each classroom. Each of them independently recorded the course of the teaching process in a recording sheet. Subsequently they compared their notes and jointly created a picture of the didactic work of the teacher and of the pupils in the respective classroom.

At present the first experience from the research is being analysed and it will be a basis for the modification of the methodology of the case study, for the preparation of questionnaires from the point of view of both contents and form, for the assessment of the suitability of the selected observation techniques (selection of observation criteria, form of the recording sheet for the observers, general manner of summarising of the data). At this stage of research it is first necessary to verify the suitability of the evaluation of instruments for the evaluation of schools quality with an emphasis on the internal functioning of schools and on processes of education at the level of concrete classrooms.

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