

# WHOM RESTS TODAY'S CZECH SCHOOL CULTURE ON?

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## Whom Rests Today's Czech School Culture On?

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**Synopsis:** We have previously identified some principal areas of school operation, explored the importance of such areas from the head-teachers' viewpoints, and studied how successful the schools are in those areas (as judged by their head-teachers, again). Based on the head-teachers' evidence of the main groups of school life agents, we have described the culture of Czech schools as an educational culture with more or less significant accents on the culture of the adults. The below contribution shows, however, that the head-teachers' opinions vary abundantly. This is why we analyse their comments on the priorities of their managing jobs in order to define four types of head-teachers, exploring the conformity or diversity in their attitudes to the question of *whom rests today's Czech school culture on?*

This contribution is another partial outcome of a three-year-project<sup>1</sup> aimed at the recognition of the culture of Czech schools and its development strategies. The data we herewith interpret have been obtained through a questionnaire survey<sup>2</sup> focusing on key areas of school operation (*consent in main principles of school operation; creation and attainment of the idea of what the school is aspiring to — school vision; openness of the school towards its outer environment; stimulating milieu to learning and teaching; school management*). We have questioned the head-teachers how such areas of school operation should have worked and how they in fact did. In the framework of this, we have explored the head-teachers' comments about the contents of such categories. Also, we have asked them to name the agents expected to be liable for the operation of such areas.

In questions related to each of the above areas, the head-teachers could choose among eleven agents of school life (plus the option of *others*)<sup>3</sup>. Then they were asked to indicate five subjects they considered correlative with each area, and five agents they considered essential for them. The area of *school's openness to outer environment* was specific, offering fourteen options of which six agents were to be chosen, three of them in the outer environment and three within. Finally, at *school management* we did not ask about agents but about mere subjects.

Asking about agents, we were interested in who is considered by the head-teachers as primarily responsible for the functioning of each area, which of those five key agents are considered predominant, which of them are rather less eminent, and which do not play any key part at all. The roles of adults and pupils (or the relationship between them) have to be discussed here; not only in the context of school functioning but especially in relation to the types of school culture.

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<sup>2</sup> The questionnaires were distributed to head-teachers of basic schools (schools combining elementary and lower secondary levels) in mid May 2002. 500 printed questionnaires were sent by ordinary mail, another 500 of them by e-mail. A total of 168 questionnaires were returned, 124 of them printed and 44 electronic.

<sup>3</sup> All the options to choose from were *superior educational authorities, school inspection, relevant municipal authorities, the establishing entity, the head-teacher and members of the managing staff, most teachers, all teachers, pupils, parents, non-teaching staff of the school, school council, others*.

## The image of Czech school culture in head-teachers' statements

The results have shown that it is the teachers, head-teachers and other members of the managing staff, the establishing entity, pupils, and parents who is regarded as the main agents of school life. On the other hand, school inspection, relevant municipal authorities, or non-teaching staff is mentioned scarcely. It is teachers who generally dominate the list. It seems that their foremost position may be of key importance for the formulation and the materialization of development strategies of school culture.

Relatively stable is the position of managing staffs. Their importance seems to be higher in areas perceived by the head-teachers as internal parts of school functioning. Also strong is the position of establishing entities and parents (respectively; parents ranking before establishing entities only at *openness to outer environment*).

Pupils seem to be less important for the key areas of school functioning than their parents. Where they have gained most space is the area of *stimulating milieu to learning and teaching*, while at *openness to outer environment* they do not appear among the main agents at all. This indicates that the head-teachers do not consider them as partners for the school's communication with the outer world. Does it mean, then, that they forget that it *is* the pupils who — in their specific manner, but in any case — communicate about school, say with their parents?

One of the paradoxes we could discover is that the principles of the relationship between adults and pupils remain outside open communication, in spite of the fact that such principles is what the *consent in main principles of school operation* and the *school vision* should closely be related to. The principles of relations are probably not communicated as a priority, or perhaps they fully remain outside any communication. A non-communicated consent can merely be supposed. Yet, if a consent of adults and pupils (or *about* pupils) is supposed but not discussed and/or defined, many a misunderstanding may appear and certain risks for the school's functioning and development may arise — even more so if the relationship between adults and pupils is part of the school vision.

Symptoms of educational culture with elements of the culture of the adults have been identified in the areas of the *consent in main principles of school operation, creation and attainment of school vision*, and *stimulating milieu to learning and teaching*. Pupils in Czech schools are probably given the role of those who have the right to be educated and taught. On the other hand, teachers and school managers expect the active exercise of such right from pupils. On top of that, equally expected is the responsibility for the motivation of their learning, or for their learning itself. The shift towards the culture of the adults can especially be seen in the area of the *openness of the school* where pupils do not appear at all. The communication between the school and its environment is therefore a space for a communication about pupils, yet without them.

## Diversity of head-teacher's opinions

Besides the above conclusions, it is worth noticing how different the head-teachers' statements were for some areas. Namely, except for one area, not even half of the respondents could agree on all five agents. This is why we consider necessary to compare the head-teachers' opinions, varied as much as their schools.

Our contemplation is based on the exploration of how the head-teachers judge *their own* roles, i. e. how they have answered the following question: "In your leading position, you consider most important to focus on..." No other area was as diversely perceived as the priorities of a head-teacher's job. As can be seen in the chart, mere two items were

mentioned by more than a half of all head-teachers: *efficient communication* and *creation of the school's bearing*.

**Chart 1**

In your leading position, you consider most important to focus on... (mark up to 5 most important options):	Total answers	Share answers (%)
efficient communication <sup>4</sup>	122	72,6
creation of the school's bearing	93	55,4
teachers' professional development	66	39,3
work results of the school	61	36,3
creation and guidance of teams	61	36,3
mastering of conflicts	58	34,5
coordination of other people's actions	51	30,4
planning in the school	50	29,8
check-up of people's results	50	29,8
change instigation	49	29,2
understanding of oneself and others	45	26,8
delegation of tasks to others	34	20,2
evaluation of people	24	14,3
mastering of changes	21	12,5
evaluation of the school	20	11,9
<b>Respondents in total</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>100,0</b>

So, the two above cited items have been mentioned much more often than the rest. Does it really mean that these activities are considered by the head-teachers as most important? In other words, do they represent the hard core of the managing job of today's head-teachers of Czech schools? What can be deduced from the fact that all the remaining items differ greatly? Does this have to do with very individual preferences?

How does the general image disintegrate if we distinguish various head-teachers' perspectives? Through the techniques of multi-variation analysis (mainly the cluster analysis) we could differentiate four main sets of head-teachers' priorities. By the identification with either of such sets, four types of head-teachers can generally be distinguished:

- type I, combining in his/her priorities the mastering of changes, evaluation of people, evaluation of schools, delegation of tasks, and understanding oneself and others: **a head-teacher who accentuates leadership**
- type II, combining in his/her priorities the planning in the school, check up of people's results, coordination of other people's actions, and the work results: **a head-teacher who accentuates control**
- type III, combining in his/her priorities the instigation of changes, creation and guidance of teams, and teachers' professional development: **a head-teacher who accentuates innovations**

<sup>4</sup> It is also worthwhile to notice that the item of *efficient communication* significantly gains in importance in bigger schools. (This and other relations were verified through the appropriate statistic procedure at the limit of significance, 5 %.)

- type IV, combining in his/her priorities the efficient communication and creation of the school's main bearing. Here it is rather troublesome to speak about a real type, as these items were very frequent (almost three quarters of the responding head-teachers have mentioned efficient communication). This is why we rather think it is a kind of characteristics, variedly mixed with other features. May this perhaps be a key to understand all the rest, interconnecting the other characteristics and making them into the ultimate set?

Now let us endeavour to link the four types to the context indicated by the data analysis (that of the respondents' statements about their priorities and agents or, say, accentuated subjects).

### **Type I; head-teacher who accentuates leadership**

In the stratum of relations, such type exerts his/her pro-social orientation, mainly focusing on the teaching staff. Mutual confidence and the feeling of safety is highly important for him/her. A safe atmosphere is probably what his/her idea of school management is based on. (The self-evaluation of the school, which he/she prefers, is certainly safer than any evaluation from the outside.) Type I is a head-teacher who does not look for changes and experiments, substituting them by overall consent among the staff and good relations with the outer environment — mainly with superior structures, the school council, and the inspection. The view of the future is not of the greatest importance for such head-teacher.

It is the least frequent type, represented by approximately one fifth of our batch.<sup>5</sup>

### **Type II; head-teacher who accentuates control**

This type is evidently the most directive of our list. Highly important for him/her is the unity of impact, including the unity of behaviour to the exterior. He/she seldom appreciates initiative and creativity, wants to supervise changes, and feels obliged to plan and check every single step forward. Parents have to stay at distance, though their support to teaching is required. The inspection and the establishing authority are largely respected. Such head-teacher is afraid of conflicts, feeling threatened by them.

Approximately one third of the head-teachers in our batch belong to this type.<sup>6</sup>

### **Type III; head-teacher who accentuates innovations**

Such head-teacher is open to innovations and changes, mainly in order to develop the teaching staff. Failures in the materialization of such changes make him feel unsuccessful in his/her position, though. The opportunities for changes are mostly seen within the school, as he/she is rather reserved towards parents (nonetheless expecting their support) and hardly ever looks for backing from other external agents. Also, he/she usually gives up any ambition to find consent with all members of the teaching staff.

Again, this type could be represented by one third of our batch.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In another study and based on a different set of data, a similar director's role was once called "the chosen person" whose responsibility was to care for the social space for people, in order for them to feel good and enjoy comfort, calmness, and humanity.

<sup>6</sup> This type has also been described previously, namely as a "stand-in": such head-teacher had won a certain competition over others (a tender, perhaps) which makes him feel superior and in charge of whatever happens in the school.

## “Type” IV

As mentioned, we do not dare to speak about another type of head-teacher<sup>8</sup> here, but rather about a key to understand everything else we have mentioned. It may be grasped variedly why these items are so frequent and interconnected. One of the explanations is based on the combination of these items: the head-teachers are aware of the fact that teachers (or most of them) should be well informed — mainly about the visions, missions, and targets — which requires good communication. Another potential interpretation is based on the difference among those items: efficient communication is directed inside (to most teachers) and has mainly to do with teaching, while the creation of the school’s bearing has to do with outer “communication” (or consent), such as with the establishing entity and alike agents.

## Discussion

The most frequently mentioned priorities of the head-teachers’ practice is what our discussion should be based on. We believe that the overall image, as we have it outlined, has much to do with the fact that a vast majority of today’s head-teachers in the Czech Republic are members of the generation of the 1990’s. They have been entering their positions without much training, forced to learn things interminably, with no assistance then — and with hardly more systematic assistance now. In their struggle for success they have adopted a certain style of work, not ideal but allowing them to live and survive. What matters is that they have arrived at certain limits, and no more advance is possible without a change of style, which the head-teachers probably cannot do and perhaps even do not want to.

Though, new requirements are coming forth: it is necessary to work more sensitively with establishing entities, which needs support from within the school. Visions and prospective outlooks are now more intensely required (despite the complicated present and unclear future). Notwithstanding all the difference among head-teachers and their attitudes, the fact that two main items of their job are predominant, i. e. efficient communication and work with the vision, is a logic consequence of the development.

## Conclusion

We had asked on whom today’s culture of the Czech school was resting on. From the head-teacher’s point of view, such culture is clearly created by adult agents. It is an educational culture, dealing with children — or rather pupils — as they are among us, the adults. This finding is backed by the fact that we have not encountered a head-teacher who would urge the participation of children in the main areas of school operation. There is no type of a head-teacher transgressing the model of “whatever-happens-at-school-must-remain-within”. Besides, all types more or less give up any chance to find a consent among all teachers.

In many an aspect of school culture, however, an extraordinary variability of views is to be acknowledged: some head-teachers rely on people’s initiative, others evidently reject it. The head-teacher is somewhere regarded as a “human being”, elsewhere rather as an

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<sup>7</sup> Even here we have a role to apply, the role of the “legate” who became director thanks to his/her promises to materialize changes and development.

<sup>8</sup> Yet, if such type was to be labelled, with a little exaggeration it would be the “visionary of the head-teacher’s office”.

“executioner of orders”. Some views of the school are static, others are real visions, perhaps created by the head-teacher him/herself and perhaps not even communicated to all those around. There are schools at which changes and innovations are instigated by head-teachers, and there are others where changes are urged “bottom-up”.

In the combination of equal and different elements of the head-teachers’ statements, some essential features of today’s school are indicated. Also, indications of who creates, or can create the culture of the school are shown, pointing to possible ways towards the change and development of Czech schools.