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Teachers and Innovation; Opening Stage of an Exploration of Today's Practice

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The below text presents the results of the opening stage of a research called *Teachers and Innovation; on current practice and on some options of the development of teaching*. This research belongs to a project supported by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic¹, aimed at the exploration of innovations in everyday teaching. The goal of the project is to identify the incentives of innovations and to describe the innovation processes from planning to evaluation. As a necessary precondition of efficient support to innovations, the understanding of such processes is crucial for any positive development of education.

This contribution cannot coin an ultimate definition of *innovativity*, nor is such task the target of this study. Describing a teacher innovative, various characteristics may be meant, such as his/her working creativity, or rather the willingness to changes, or the skills and abilities to launch changes, or the inner motivation to changes, or even the quickness in changes. Besides that, there are doubts whether innovativity can be found within externally enforced processes, such as those incited by technological progress (e. g. Internet in schools). The adjective *innovative* cannot be confounded with *alternative* (Průcha, 1998; Rýdl, 2002). So, for the sake of this research project, an innovative teacher is defined as the one who *implements changes* into his/her own job.

In the opening stage of the project, a questionnaire was used as a screening tool. The questionnaire was distributed to innovative teachers, represented by members and supporters of the professional association of *Friends of Alert Teaching*, during their 19th national reunion in the town of Fulnek. The *Friends'* reunions consist in workshops and seminars on miscellaneous topics, discussing any subjects and school grades. Attended by some 200 teachers, this year's workshops and seminars were held on 26-28 April 2002. Having been distributed to every participant, 92 fully or partly answered questionnaires were returned, 16 respondents offering their addresses in view of any possible co-operation in the successive stages of the research.

Objectives of the questionnaire survey

Our expectations of the survey were mainly aimed at the motivations and incentives of innovations, and at the comprehension of the conditions of successful innovation implementation. Through the survey we intended to get an overview of a wide range of possible targets, successes, failures, burdens, and supportive factors within the process of innovation implementation. This field not having been comprehensively described in our country so far, such opening stage of the exploration helps prepare a background for more detailed studies.

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The research sample²

Considering the array of the sample, the myth of young teachers being innovative gets rather shattered. The largest group (34 of 92) is teachers of more than 10 years of experience. Those of over 20 years of experience are largely represented too.

Chart 1: Respondents, by experience

Under 10 years	30
11 to 20 years	34
Over 20 years	25
Not specified	3
Total	92

As for the male/female proportion, the sample is dominated by women (78 of 92 respondents), which seems well obvious under the heavy feminization of Czech education.

Chart 2: Respondents, by sex

Male	11
Female	78
Not specified	3
Total	92

Also, the structure of school grades is illustrative. An overwhelming majority of the sample is teachers of what in the Czech Republic is labelled *basic school*, a joint nine-year-school for children aged roughly 6-15 (ISCED 1+2). Innovators are traditionally hosted by elementary schools, lower secondary schools not being much more conservative³.

Chart 3: Respondents, by school grade or type

Kindergarten	6
Elementary school	42
Lower secondary school	36
Higher elementary school	2
Special education	4
Others	2
Total	92

Research results

Work-style specifics⁴

² Data collection and analysis partly done by students of *Department of Educational Studies*: Kateřina Vrtílková, Roman Švaříček, Jan Křelina

³ At the lower secondary level, innovation efforts are probably boosted by the competition of lower grade of *gymnázium*, a type of school restored after 1989, after an inter-war Czech tradition.

⁴ Most problems were observed through a battery of questions, with free answers. These answers were analysed and categories were defined, to which the answers were allocated. An answer consisting of more parts or levels

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For a better understanding of the specifics of the research sample, we have tried to identify what makes the group under observation feel different from the common standard (see Chart 4). The teachers see the difference in their schooling methods and in the forms of their children guidance. Also, and more specifically, elements of drama education, personal-and-social education, or relaxation techniques have been mentioned. Frequently, these teachers see their specific attitude in project teaching and co-operative learning. Except for methods and forms, open and personal approach to children or, less so, the targets the teachers impose upon themselves is what they mention.

Chart 4: What the respondents believe their work is different in

Methods and forms of children guidance	41
Approach to children	16
Project teaching & mini-projects	13
Co-operative and team teaching	10
Targets they impose for teaching	3

Stimuli of innovations

The only question to which we had offered a closed answer was *Where do the stimuli for the improvement or the change of your work-style come from?* Here, instruction, seminars, and trainings are predominant (mentioned by 87 of 92 respondents). Also, specialist literature (59) and colleagues (57) play their role. Such colleagues, though, are mostly those encountered at instructional events or alike opportunities, rather than members of their own staffs (see Chart 5).

Chart 5: Where the stimuli of innovations come from

Seminars, trainings	87
Professional reading	59
Colleagues	57
School management	39
Elsewhere (home, children, etc.)	26
Parents	8

What the innovators struggle for

What are the above stimuli aimed at and what actually is the point the teachers follow? This can be deduced from the answers to *What do you endeavour to improve or change within your work?* Above all, the teachers attempt to improve their teaching methods and styles, wishing to use modern teaching methods in order to newly, interestingly, and more clearly present the learning material to pupils (see Chart 6). Do they hence mean that the target of innovations is the usage of better procedures? Is this perhaps a confusion of targets and means?

could have been allocated to more than one category. At least 90 % answers could always be allocated, while the remaining were either missing or their contents was not repeated by minimum three respondents.

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In fact, other data we could gather show that such presumption is not that much true. Quite many teachers do know that methods is the tool, not the target of a change. More answers appeared, that is to say, indicating a change of the climate or of the atmosphere in the school. The necessity to alter or improve one's own features, mainly the approach to the job or to pupils, is often mentioned (10 replies). Seven respondents have even remarked that they wanted to change *themselves*. The complexity of the tasks the teachers impose upon themselves is sometimes expressed by the answer *everything*, appearing 10 times.

Chart 6: What teachers endeavour to change within their work

Methods and forms of children guidance	38
Climate, atmosphere, social environment	12
Everything	10
Relation to job and pupils, one's own attitudes	10
Children, their learning and proficiency characteristics	8
Themselves	7

Successes and failures in improvements

A better insight into the teachers' reflections might be offered through the analysis of two more questions, related to what the teachers had managed to improve or change (Chart 7), or, vice versa, what they had failed to (Chart 8).

Looking at what the teachers succeed in, we are confronted with the same categories as in the previous question. However, one very important point has been added: that of the results of teaching. Children have a better relation to learning and can learn more (mentioned 9 times). Although the methods and forms of teaching prevail again, it does become evident that some respondents do not confuse their targets and means.

Chart 7: What is being improved best

Methods and forms of work in the classroom	25
One's own attitudes and behaviour	17
Children: communication, co-operation, social relations	11
Climate and atmosphere, social environment	9
Teaching results, response to teaching	9

Focusing on failures, there are areas appearing which have not been mentioned so far. Strikingly bad is the result in the co-operation with parents, colleagues, and school managers (22 times). Conservative colleagues, parents opposed to changes of the system, managers avoiding difficulties, or Municipalities and other authorities resisting innovations – they all make up a very strong conservative block. All the more, it is sometimes in vain to thoroughly explain things and persuade people to support the process of innovation. Also, it happens often that colleagues do understand the matter and do support its principles, but they feel so much restrained by their everyday duties or official regulations that they just cannot help. There are many failures in the guidance of children, too (17 replies): it seems difficult to make the change agreeable and pleasant for the pupils, and, therefore, problems of discipline originate. Teachers are especially disappointed if children do not react to their

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efforts to make teaching more interesting and more attractive. The respondents have also admitted problems with their own transformation and with their own time and forces.

Chart 8: What is being improved least

Parents, colleagues, managers, and their attitudes	22
Children: difficult behaviour, discipline, and learning	17
Methods and forms of work in the classroom	11
Money and material equipment	6
One's own attitudes and behaviour	5
Own time and forces for innovations, time in classes	4

Burdens of and support to innovation implementation

Though the public debate on the future of Czech education mainly accentuates the matter of money, the lack of funds is not the most important burden of the implementation of innovations. In this respect, money is not even a substantial factor of motivation. What mostly restrains the teachers – and mostly helps them, at the same time – is people around (Chart 9). The idleness of colleagues, lack of understanding, and no support from the management – those are the most important restraining factors. On the other hand, colleagues' support (not only of those from their own schools) helps the innovators substantially. This is proved by a very typical statement: "I go and recharge at the seminars."

Chart 9: What hinders teachers from the implementation of innovations

Colleagues: no understanding, no support, idleness	34
Money	20
Time-consuming job, time pressure in classes	14
Managers discouraging innovation efforts	11
Parents	6
Nothing	5
Pupils: no discipline, idleness	3

Chart 10: What helps teachers implement innovations

Colleagues, albeit from outside the school	36
Children and their response	21
Managers encouraging innovations	14
Further education, courses, seminars	17
Enthusiasm, own motivation	10
Parents	7
Money	3

On the process of implementation of innovations, and those who implement them

The implementation of innovations in teaching is a comprehensive process, requiring a lot of personal involvement and enthusiasm. However, this is usually not enough, and teachers

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have to look for encouragement from their colleagues, managers, and even pupils, whose positive response is a great backing for more efforts. Another significant condition is further learning and study of professional literature, again providing the innovators with inspiration.

Those who implement innovations are often under heavy pressure from their environment. This is especially alarming with those who simultaneously undergo a transition on their own, of their behaviour and working conduct. They often fight with their own doubts and with the resistance of the system. The demands they impose upon themselves and their jobs can then become too extensive.

Further steps of the research

During the oncoming stages of the research, we have to fulfil the difficult task of incorporating the above knowledge into the context of the reforming efforts within Czech education. The national programme of education development in the Czech Republic (the *White Book*) defines teachers as upholders of change. The newly formulated consent in whether and how to innovate the teaching practice is herein substantial, two aspects being underlined: (1) the teacher's growing autonomy and, consequently, his/her responsibility for anything happening within the classroom, and (2) the teacher's further professional development, accentuating the benefits of reflection practice.

There is a question outstanding, to which extent and under which conditions the experience of innovative teachers is transferable to common teacher population. Can the reform efforts rely on the willingness of most teachers to implement changes, or is it upon a small circle of alert teachers to carry them out? And, certainly, it will be necessary to grasp more thoroughly the processes outlined by this text. For this sake, it will be imperative to explore the real life, using techniques like interviews, observations, and case studies. Once again, a research has brought more questions than answers.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire, *Innovative Teachers in Today's School*

Ladies and gentlemen,

Hereunder you will find a few questions concerning your work as teachers. These questions make part of a research called *Teachers and Innovation; on current practice and on some options of the development of teaching*, carried out by the Department of Educational Sciences of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno. Answering these questions you can contribute to a better comprehension of the situation of innovative teachers in this country and indicate ways of helping and supporting such teachers.

Thank you very much,

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What type of school do you teach at?

- Kindergarten
- Basic school, grade I
- Basic school, grade II
- Secondary school
- Higher education institution
- Don't teach

How long have you been teaching?

Are you male/female?

Is there something your school is different in, as opposed to standard schools? (Be as explicit as possible, mentioning e.g. your education programmes, alternative constituting authority, interesting projects, etc.)

What do you think is different in your own work, as opposed to common work-style of Czech schools?

What do you endeavour to improve or change within your work?

What do you manage best to improve or change?

What do you manage least to improve or change?

Where do the incentives for improvements or changes of your own work-style come from?

- School managers
- Colleagues
- Parents
- Professional reading
- Seminars, trainings
- Elsewhere (specify)

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What burdens do you encounter when endeavouring to improve or implement changes into your own work?

What, on the contrary, is most helpful to you in your improvements or change implementations?

Do you wish to participate in further stages of the research? If so, please give us your contact address below.

Thank you once again for your willingness. Once published, the results of our research will hopefully be interesting and useful to you.

Mgr. Petr Novotný, Ph.D.