

## **Innovative Teachers at Today's Czech Schools**

### **Who Are They and Which Part Do They Play in the Execution of Changes?**

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Education in the Czech Republic is at the onset of a very important reform. Its goals are outlined in the National Education Development Programme (so called *White Book*, 2001) in quite a detailed manner. The reform should lead to the achievement of certain proportional and quantitative indicators and to the attainment of a target qualitative level of all types and grades of education. The path to such achievements is to be paved with internal alterations of the schools' and teachers' work.

Also, the *White Book* postulated the necessity of a curricular reform, its basis being the introduction of general educational programmes, defined through the competencies which pupils should gain. The manner of filling such competencies with contents and methods is subsequently specified by each school, creating thus what is called *school education programmes*. The creation of school education programmes is a great challenge for teaching staffs.

However, the current state of Czech education has got its blind spots and risky aspects. Absent is a newly conceived School Act. What remains untreated with apt regulations is the carrier promotion of teachers. Even if such documents entered in vigour (their drafts being available), they would hardly be able to solve the problem of poor interconnection of human resources in education (in-service teacher training, carrier promotion, and managing staff formation) with the development of the school.

The description of the target situation by the *White Book* is not but comprehensible and understandable. The ways to get to such situation are defined in external parameters, such as legislation, infrastructure, and financing. Such external changes, or proportional, depend mainly on time and political will. Instead, internal changes, or qualitative ones, of schools and the educational process depend especially on the innovation potential of schools and teachers.

The main principle, linking both strata — those of external (proportional) and internal changes — is the strengthening of school autonomy. To establish schools as principal and autonomous units in economy, management, and education (as for the curricula, mainly) means to admit that success or failure of each reform is resolved at the level of the school itself. Schools and their cultures are considered a kind of black box within which it is decided about innovations to launch and changes to subsequently happen (Finnan, Levin, 2000).

### **Teachers and innovations**

The key propositions of the *White Book* (i.e. external alterations of the educational system, internal metamorphosis of the school, and the strengthening of the autonomy) is the context of a research called *Teachers and Innovations; on current practice and on some options of the development of teaching*. For the reform to be successful in the strengthening of the autonomy of schools and teachers, it is extraordinarily necessary to bestir the system's internal reserves, look for examples of successful development, work with spots of *best practice*, and seek and employ potential agents of change (see e.g. Drdla & Rais, 2001).

For the agent of the change in education to be successful, he/she must identify him/herself with the vision of the Czech educational system, be experiencing success in the application of the principles of such vision, and be able to forward these principles to other recipients. Such people are to be looked for within the programmes and associations of

child-oriented pedagogy, struggling for a transition of the Czech school, working in that field, and achieving indisputable success.

### **An innovative teacher**

Whom we consider innovative teachers is those who advocate new attitudes to their jobs and institutions. Applying such criterion, a portrayal of an innovative teacher can be depicted as follows: he/she is creative, willing to change things, and capable and skilful enough to noticeably materialize changes. Above all, he/she changes his/her work-style (mainly in regard to the teaching process) and develops targets at which his/her teaching is aimed. Such teacher is intimately motivated to launch innovations, not waiting for external pressures to urge them. He/she often professes some alternative stream of pedagogy (*innovative* not meaning the same as *alternative*, though; see Průcha, 1998; Rýdl, 2002).

Our research attempts to define the role of innovative teachers in the reform process. Our respondents — innovative teachers — are looked for among the members of spontaneous, bottom-up, nation-wide teacher initiatives which have been independently developing in the Czech education for more than a decade. Our contribution is based on a research performed during the 2002/2003 school year. A previous questionnaire survey is now being enhanced by case studies. The teachers, as the subjects of such case studies, give their testimonies on three levels of their professional life: (1) about the work with oneself, (2) about the work with children, (3) about the relationship and the communication with other principal agents of the school's educational job. These three levels are described from three different perspectives, variedly corresponding with them, namely from a biographic, a technological, and a cultural viewpoint (see also House, 1981; Blenkin, Edwards, Kelly, 1993).

Herewith we intend to demonstrate these three perspectives using selected extracts of depositions of a lower secondary school teacher, Miss Svatava. Let us see, then, what is behind such perspectives, and let us apply them on specific examples (not pretending completeness in either case, however).

Perspective	Focus on	Corroboration by Svatava's case
biographic	radical changes in previous career, past work with oneself, education, impulses and stimuli for implementation of innovations	inner and very intimate motivation for innovations strong influence of in-service training
technological	work with children, application of methodological and didactic schemes, difference from standard schemes, etc.	difficult differentiation between technological and relational aspects (diffusion of method and general philosophy) spontaneity of innovation implementations
cultural	school, communication with principal agents, cultural level, burdens at school, colleagues' support, etc.	difficult assertion at her own school problems in communication with other teachers disagreement with colleagues about values

### **On the implementation of innovations and those who implement them**

As can be seen, the implementation of innovations into the work of a teacher is a comprehensive process, requiring strong enthusiasm and eagerness. This is usually not enough, though: teachers are looking for more support from their colleagues, the managing staff, and their pupils, too, whose affirmative reaction is a great boost to more efforts. Another important precondition is their in-service training and specialist reading, which again — along with the help from colleagues — inspires the innovators. In conformity with Glover and Low (2002, p. 145) we have to maintain that it is good to disregard whatever cannot be influenced (material equipment, etc.) and pay attention to the variety of achievable developments, which teachers in our batch in fact do.

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 their working conduct. They often have to combat their own doubts and with the resistance of the system. The demands they impose upon themselves may become too extensive. To touch upon some risks, as Timperley & Robinson do (2000, p. 47 and forth), is therefore quite apposite.

A researcher gets in trouble, also, when interpreting such difficult process. Unfortunately, rational schemes fail often. For instance, the phasing of innovations as in the *planning — implementation — evaluation* scheme is hardly ever fulfilled here.

### **Conclusions**

Although the innovative teachers are expected to spread innovations, not all of them are able to conform to such expectations. Case studies have indicated that the dissatisfaction of many a teacher with the delayed change of school culture either converts into resignation and escape or, on the contrary, into the decision to actively modify the system. Some teachers then become withdrawn in their classrooms, while others evolve into strongholds of teacher in-service training or become head-teachers.

There must be a suitable paradigm in order to discern the innovation implementation in today's Czech schools, to seek change agents, and to assess their possibilities of influencing the system. First of all, one of the perspectives of viewing the innovations and the development must be chosen. Several models are available: technological, cultural, and biographical (herewith mentioning only those adequate to our research). Each of them accentuates a specific part of the reality, bringing specific results. Which of them is the most useful, yet?

Above all, the chosen paradigm must help us tell to which extent and under which conditions the experience of innovators is communicable to workaday teachers. Such communicability is perhaps the key condition to efficient acting of change supporters in the system. And, in this respect, we cannot but conclude with an unfortunate finding: our research shows that innovative teachers mainly rely on their enthusiasm and willingness to "invest themselves". However, reform efforts can hardly be based on mere fervour of innovative teachers.

## **The Case of Svatava**

### **Previous experience**

I don't remember quite well when it was, but definitely there was a time when I was entering the classroom saying to myself: "I just can't do this till the end of my life, it's such a drag, boring for me, boring for those kids, but I'd love to offer something to them." So I was unhappy of that.

### **In-service training**

When I was at a course at X, I could discover there are ways how to do Czech, well, seems to me rather literature and composition. Then I went through careers choice, and that was another shock, because I found out I didn't even need any books to do a lot of work with the kids. And finally with that, not consciously, but finally there was some critical thinking, and that comprised everything, and everything was in the right place, whatever I did and discovered before.

### **Personal satisfaction**

I don't want it to sound as a platitude, but I started to enjoy teaching again, and I didn't think anymore of selling newspapers or sit somewhere in a news-stand so that I could read all those magazines and newspapers published or work as an usherette in a cinema so that I could see all those films, but honestly I started enjoying that again. But that's why I did it, 'cause there was a time it was just a drag.

### **Dissatisfaction with colleagues**

Now there's the other extreme, I just do like it and the drag is that others don't want to understand it, that we don't have to drill the kids, just information, information, that is.

### **Opportunity for alliances within the school**

Now concerning the careers I thought who can join me so that I don't do it against the general opinion. I can't do it myself, and with the managers neither, for what they say, everybody thinks that's an order, so that it's done like that, but there's no intimate need for people to do it. It's done because Mrs head-teacher has ordered it and some bonus is promised for that.

### **Feeling of guilt**

It's my fault that whatever I do, I can't push it through, and it's been long like this, but that feeling is disappearing now, more and more it is, and I hope it's gonna be better. Several times I said: "Come to see my classes." "When?" "Whenever." It's hard to understand for them, isn't it. But it took so long before I dared, for I had that feeling I'm a big girl, I'm better than them in something. I do have that feeling, that it's better for the kids, it's better for me as a teacher, that approach. But you know what they say: "She's going somewhere, she's learning something, now she's gonna teach us, but we've learnt enough in all those years..."

### **Instructing experience at her own school**

Nobody's the prophet at home, 'twas quite a blow when I first tried it at school. I thought I'd prepared quite carefully, I thought there would be group work but there was nothing like that 'cause I really felt I'd kicked a wasp nest.

### **Spontaneity of implementation**

Me, when I returned from the first seminar, so I said to the lady who was head-teacher then, I said that's great, I'm doing it all but finally it's got some roof, it's got some system. After the second session I was not that sure that I do it all, that it's about something else than just now and then try something, so I was putting it together and I was saying to myself, after all those sessions, well I'll do this once and I'll try that some time and that's interesting. Then I was in grade five once, and I was not able to explain things to the kids, they simply didn't understand anything. Well, I came home and I said, what shall I do? And then it started turning over in my mind what we were doing at that course, and I took the manuals at half past ten when I was in bed, while I normally work at a table, so I took a note what I could do with those kids and suddenly they were caught.