

Innovation in the Work of a Teacher

The success of every innovation in education is decided at the moment when concrete individuals (teachers) undergo the process of change of their own approach to concrete educational activities. The main documents to determine the principles of educational system reform in the CR, mainly the so-called White Book (Bílá, 2001), also refer to teacher as a bearer of changes. To borrow a term from some concepts of managerial theory (cf e.g. Drdla and Rais, 2001), the teacher therefore has to become the agent or actor of the change.

Empirical research (Novotný, 2002, Novotný, 2003) proves that implementation of innovation into the work of a teacher is a complex process that requires a strong personal absorption or enthusiasm for the case on the part of the teacher. However, this usually does not suffice, teachers are seeking support in their colleagues, in the management of the school as well as in their pupils the positive reaction of whom is a great reassurance in the teachers' further efforts. An important prerequisite is also adult education or studying of specialized literature, which again – together with the teachers' colleagues – renders vigour to innovate their work.

It is necessary to realize that during the innovation process the teachers undergo the process of both work and social adaptation. Both the adaptation to new social relations and the work adaptation – a gradual levelling of the set of personal prerequisites of the individual with the requirements of the work position – may be supported and directed in a great variety of ways (Nový et al., 1993). The goal of direction of the adaptation process is the best and quickest coping with work requirements, gaining of the perspective of further personal growth, and integration into the new structure of human relations (ibid). Obviously the most important part of the adaptation process is adult education. According to literature the direct connection between a healthy course of the adaptation process and both work results and the individual experience is evident (ibid).

An important element of innovation processes is the process of acquiring new competencies, i.e. the process of learning. The teachers learn to create a different environment for teaching pupils thereby founding a space for new situations they have to cope up with as a consequence; they learn to work in new conditions, to solve new problems. Other actors also go through a more or less intense process of learning – the pupils learn (not only in the didactic sense of the word) to handle situations created by the teacher and the methods of work requested by the teacher. School as a whole as an intelligent system to it adapts to the changing external and internal conditions, through which it becomes a learning organization in an ideal case (Leithwood et al., 1998).

It follows from the theoretical frame for cogitation on innovations (Novotný 2004) in the work of a teacher that innovations in the work of a teacher are a complex and many-sided phenomenon. At school, same as in every other organization, it is always worthwhile to enquire what is necessary for actors of the life of a school to be open to innovations and to see in them an opportunity for themselves. Theories, especially concepts of development of school, offer certain answers to this question.

To say with Drucker, "innovations have conception and perception character at the same time" (1993, p. 139). It ensues from this that a successful implementation of innovations rests not only in a precise analytical work in analysing an opportunity for innovation but also in a perceptive recognition of expectations, values and needs of people, which is necessary for a positive acceptance of innovations. Therefore it is necessary to listen carefully to those who will be most affected by innovations.

Innovations in the work of a teacher can be interpreted on three levels that at the same time stand for three possible perspectives of viewing innovations (after Blenkin, Edwards and Kelly, 1993, House, 1981). On the personality level our thinking directs to the perspective that is usually designated as biographic. On the level and perspective of technology our attention turns to the method of work in the class. Finally, on the cultural level we turn to the positioning of the teacher's effort into the context of values and standards of both the school and its broader environment. It is especially the last mentioned level we would like to concentrate on in this paper.

The cultural level of innovation in the work of a teacher

A teacher though lives and works within the social environment of the school and its culture. With a degree of overstatement (as the operation and culture of a school are describable and to a great degree also steerable) it is said that a school and its culture can be held for a kind of a black box, in which it is decided what innovations are implemented and what change occurs (Finnan, Levin, 2000). One of the most important factors is considered to be the fact that a school and its culture implicitly contain an element of inertia that is in principle contradictory to the need to innovate the activity of the school. Bacík (1990) remarks that this phenomenon can be evaluated both positively and negatively. Thus at one time he himself uses the terms "tradition", "established ways of activity", even "a self-control ability" etc., whilst at another time his terms are like "inertia", "inertia in thinking", "inclinations to routine" etc.

A school also is an „educational bureaucracy“ to it (Krech, Crutchfield and Ballachey 1968, p. 457), which means that its „formal, rationally organized social structure will not do without clearly defined patterns of activity [...]. An easy calculability of the behaviour of other people and a stable set of mutual expectations follow from here“ (Merton, 2000, p. 178). A bureaucracy described like this evidently is not available to a great innovativeness. However on the other hand, even overcoming of inertia as the factor acting against innovations within the school does not mean a smooth enforcement of changes. There is also a broader social and cultural context; the expectations from outside of the school are equally conservative, if not even more so.

How innovative teachers perceive themselves in the context of the school (Case studies)

To illustrate how innovative teachers perceive the cultural level, extracts from three case studies were chosen from material gathered within the research project Teachers and innovations. These are case studies of women teachers. Criteria for the selection of cases were described earlier (Novotný, 2003); for the purpose of this paper the cases were selected in such a way that they show variability of the problem. The main research method was a semi-structured interview, recorded by a Dictaphone to be written down and analysed at a later date. The collected material is presented in a greatly abridged form; therefore a prevailing part of assertions about the informants is not substantiated with quotes.

The congruence between the cases is that all the three informants represent a situation when the need of innovation issues from below, and is neither a result of a pressure exerted from outside nor a request imposed from above. In all cases the role of the mediator of a demand for innovation from outside is played by courses of adult education of teachers, but primarily these are courses emerged from within pedagogical initiatives, hence also activities stemming from below. The respondents are of similar ages, and all of them work at elementary school (one of them at elementary stage). Obviously there are differences in situations in which the informants find themselves both at school and out of school.

Conclusions

The conclusions from the case studies may rather be derived at the hypothetic level than in the form of final conclusions. We can see from the case studies that although the informants do not lack certain ambitions to spread innovations at their schools (as well as out of them), at their schools they only push themselves through with difficulties. There are

occasional problems occurring in communication with the other teachers based on a discrepancy of values. The informants are also doubtful about the ways of managing the school, and share a feeling of lack of appreciation of their work by their colleagues and superiors alike. On the strength of findings from the previous phases of research it is possible to state that these problems are largely typical for innovative teachers in general.

Appendix: Case studies

Case study No 1.

Světlana, 37 years old, graduated from Education for elementary school teaching

Profession rank: elementary school teacher, at her new workplace a deputy headmistress, lecturer of adult education for teachers

Institutionalised adult education: primarily courses within the framework of the Start Together programme (Step by step CR), studying of a business entrepreneurial subject

The story of innovation:

The style of work she developed primarily due to courses of the Start Together project enabled her to fulfil her ideal of schoolwork. She leaves the school feeling a lack of support by the management. As the main reason of her leaving she states the necessity to take care of a family business on a temporary basis. She leaves at the half of a school year; after one year she applies for an open competition in a new school and from the following school year she takes up the post of deputy headmistress.

Selected extracts from an interview

On the possibilities to push through innovation in the work of teachers

It would be naïve to think that when someone is pushing through something new, everybody will get enthusiastic. Well, they won't ... Understandably, as many people get defensive saying this is something extra, they would need to work more, they would be bothered in some way, someone doesn't toe the line. There are people who feel hindered, who don't like it, who like their own comfort. On the other hand there are people who take sides with you, who will support you – I think it's the same everywhere.

On the subject of support by the management

And the biggest problem of this kind, or what I found to be a problem, is when you encounter a lack of understanding in many things on the part of the management. It's because they should be knowledgeable, they should understand it, they should be well versed in a number of fields, so I just think that every right boss should know and be aware of what has he got at his school, what people has he got, what do people do there and so on. I just get angry about such a lack of professionalism on the side of the management.

On her temporary leave of the school system

And the other reason is that I have always had ... that everywhere apart from this school I have always had a feeling that my work was appreciated, or one at least got thanks for what he or she was doing, as you do this and that and a thousand of things on top of that, but with this management I have never seen any future or a support. And I just got worked up, this has definitely contributed as well.

Case study No 2.

Svatava, 45 years old, graduated from Education for lower secondary school teaching

Profession rank: lower secondary school teacher, lectrice of adult education for teachers

Institutionalised adult education: courses of drama teaching, educational consultancy, and courses of the Critical Thinking programme; enhancing of her teaching qualification by the English language

The story of innovation:

Primarily because of adult education she finds a new motivation for teacher's work. Despite the failure of an attempt to spread innovation at her school she becomes a lectrice of adult education for teachers. At school she concentrates on her work in the classes and has no ambition to change school.

Selected extracts from an interview

Dissatisfaction with her colleagues

This is another extreme again as I really enjoy doing this, but on the other hand I get annoyed as the others won't get the message that we just don't need to cram the children's heads with them information, information, information.

A possibility of an alliance within the school

Now in relation to the choice of career (involvement in the project – PN note) I was thinking as to whom to ally with there, so as not to do it against the general opinion. I won't manage myself, nor together with the school management as whatever is said by the management is taken as a command and therefore it is done, but the internal need of the people is what's missing. They just do things because of the headmistress' order and the rewards she has promised.

A feeling of misconduct

It is my mistake that I can't assert what I am doing, and I have a feeling that ...I feel like this less and less, and hope it will gradually become better. I have already said a couple of times „Come and see my lesson“ „When?“ „Any time“. This is what they can't understand, you know? But it took a lot of time before I gathered my courage as I had a feeling I was putting on airs pretending to be better than they were in some respect. I do have the feeling that this approach is better for them kids, for myself as a teacher, but there's always rumours like „she travels somewhere, she learns something, now she's going to patronize, but throughout the years we have learnt our ways already“...

Experience with lectrice work in her school

No one is a prophet at home; it was quite a blow when I have tried it at school. I think I have taken quite a care to prepare assuming that there will be work in groups, but it never got quite as far as that because I indeed felt as if I have stirred up a wasp nest.

Case study No 3.

Simona, 39 years old, graduated from Education for lower secondary school teaching

Profession rank: lower secondary school teacher, lecturer of adult education for teachers

Institutionalised adult education: primarily courses within the framework of the Can We Do It? Project, educational events by Friends of Innovative Learning, enhancing of her teaching qualification by the German language

The story of innovation:

Simona is put off her quite common routine approach to work by the newly coming headmistress. Under the headmistress' influence and in cooperation with her Simona becomes active in spreading innovation at her school. Five years later the headmistress is removed and the innovation processes at the school jeopardized.

Selected extracts from an interview

Reactions to invitation for cooperation from the new headmistress

I absolutely didn't get her. I was irritated by her methods „we will pass on a little stone and tell our names“. One was not used to it ... A year later I even found myself gliding along the headmistress' room so that she couldn't see me as she really did address me ...

On the reaction of the teaching staff to a change into the headmistress' backer

When it was at the beginning, they just took me like this: yes, Simona will do it... She will do it and then I will not have to do it. Then suddenly them people who wanted to work started to flock so that our number was increasing, and I started to become more of an initiator than a workhorse. Then I sensed something like: “Watch out, she's making her way up“.

On the situation within the teaching staff after the removal of the headmistress

What I felt most uneasy about, I thought or I was sure from how the people behaved that they were satisfied with the method of working and deciding at school about the operation of the school, about the creation of the school. And it was a great disappointment for me that some of those people mainly just did it to appeal to the management, or to avoid problems rather than being really interested in what was the school going to aspire to, as this demanded some engagement, a view, and then also some work or efforts on their side.