Situation of school self-evaluation in the Czech Republic

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This paper is focused on school self-evaluation in the Czech Republic. It offers the overview of main changes which took place after 1989 and provided a broad social framework for operation of schools. Also, it links self-evaluation to recent legislation which explicitly determines its state of art and also steps to be taken in the near future. Some challenges related to the issue of school self-evaluation are indicated, too: they have been derived from analysis of current situation and also experience from the pilot project of school self-evaluation in the Czech Republic. We are referring to processes which concern basic schools (6-15) and secondary schools (16-19).

Social and educational background

The political change in 1989 followed by social and economic reforms started also transformation process in the field of education. Czech schools and the whole system of education have undergone a number of changes since. Among those which probably most strongly influenced the way schools operate now (and consequently also a position of school self-evaluation processes within the formal sector) were deideologization and depolitization, decentralization, and autonomization of schools.

The leading role of the Communist party and dominancy of official state ideology of Marxism were rejected soon after the break up in 1989, and consequently schools were freed from the obligation to follow these lines. Although in a number of schools it used to be done very formally until 1989, the change meant a real release for vast majority of those involved.

As for decentralization, schools´ traditionally strong ties to central bodies which were for decades prescribing and controlling the way schools functioned were relatively radically released. The emphasis has soon been put on the local level, and lately also on the regional one. Local communities became establishing entities of basic schools, regional governments did the same in case of secondary schools.

At the same time, schools were expected to open up on the local level, and to find new quality of relations with parents and the community. This has been a challenging task for many. Traditionally, schools were focused internally, quite strongly emphasizing their "organizational borders". A number of existing participatory structures worked very formally in the past (quasi-participation was often the case), and to find new dynamics in a newly evolving situation takes much of effort. There are successful stories, yet also the evidence of failures. An attempt to introduce school governance system with boards of governors playing the main role has been repeatedly made since mid 1990s – until now without much of success, though.

Since early 1990s, a relatively large space for autonomous school development has been provided to schools. It concerned practically all main aspects of school operation. In fact, the question of the past "how to find the space for at least limited actions?" was replaced by a new one: "how to make use the space offered in a meaningful way?". The answer to the latter question is not easy to find for many schools, for many reasons. New agenda is much richer, broader, more demanding from schools and their staff. A large proportion of

headteachers was newly appointed after 1989 and they lacked experience and training. The same was the case of many other people in schools who were in one or another way involved in school leadership. Moreover, many structures of external support were fragmented and not really systematic (in-service providers), or simply absent (school counseling). "Learning by doing" seemed to be symptomatic for very first years of 1990s, later the situation has stabilized in certain extent.

Gradually, the emphasis on developing schools from within was declared. In about a decade, Czech schools were shifted from the role of executors of ready made curricula to the role of autonomous, internally developing organizations which are expected to provide adequate learning opportunities to young people´s population in the way schools find most appropriate, to maintain synergic and complementary relations with parents and the local community – within broad limits set by the state.

At the same time, throughout the 1990s, accountability was increasingly becoming the issue. Since late 1990s schools were expected to write and publish annual reports (in the first phase linked to school self-evaluation only in part, and selectively. Questions of quality and its management started to be discussed and dealt with in the practice.

Consequently, a need to develop and make use of skills of analysis, reflection and evaluation their own work became more than evident for schools.

On current situation

After two decades, new School Act has been approved by the parliament and came in force since January 1, 2005. It has the strongest influence on schools´ functioning in number of respects. The full-range implementation of the School Act should be completed by the end of 2007. Among the most important elements of it are the ones as follows:

❑ school and framework curriculum programs
❑ school governing bodies
❑ school self-evaluation

School and framework curriculum programs

The reform of curriculum and its management has been started by introducing the concept of framework curriculum (state provided) and school curriculum (provided but also developed by schools themselves). This brings brand new requirements to teachers and school management. First time ever in a modern era, schools and their teachers are expected to act autonomously this way, being encouraged to search ways how to integrate traditionally designed teaching subjects, how to develop curriculum together, in co-operation. Despite to many criticisms (lack of time, no advance preparation, scarce resources, and more), this measure can bring significant change to schools and their understanding of "how to work together" in order to succeed.

School governing bodies

After years of hesitant central policy related to the very issue of schools governance, school governing bodies are becoming the must for every basic and secondary schools. Consisting proportionally of representatives of the teaching staff, students major of age, parents, local community, labour marker bodies, and more, these bodies have not only the potential to become most massive form of life-long learning (Sayer, 1993). They bring in new dimension

of reviewing some aspects of school´s operation, too. Yet successful aiming toward these ends will require a lot of effort of many of those involved, incl. the external support agents.

School self-evaluation

According to the new School Act, schools are expected to develop skills and practices of their own self-evaluation in a visible future in order to master new demands and requirements. Schools as organisations developing from within should be able to reflect their own efforts, to analyse and evaluate them, and on this basis to plan further actions. It should be pointed out that school self-evaluation is not absolutely strange concept for Czech schooling (there were some minor attempts, several pilot projects, some en lightening publications in recent years), but in majority of schools more systematic and participatory based approach is still to come.

Main challenges

So what are the main challenges of self-evaluation in the Czech republic? Among the main ones firstly two related to central as well as other levels (incl. school level) should be mentioned:

- policy development
- implementation strategies.

The success or failure of these generally defined determinants of change will definitely influence:

- motivation of school staff
- skills of school staff
- access to relevant training
- access to relevant information
- access to external support (schools counselling)
- mutual proportion and roles of self-evaluation and external evaluation
- access to strategies of school self-evaluation
- monitoring and evaluation of self-evaluation efforts
- and many other aspects.

Consequently, this will be decisive factors of what will be the role of school self-evaluation in Czech schools and their work in a visible future.

Generally speaking, school self-evaluation is another step on the way to make meaningful use of autonomy schools were provided with in the Czech republic. Yet whether it will succeed or not, remains to be seen.

Literature:

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