

Abstract

This study is an attempt to contribute to improved recognition of the phenomenon of leadership in the educational process as seen from the perspective of headteachers at Czech basic schools. Nevertheless, as the work was devised as being of broader scope we have dealt with several other topics related to the work of headteachers and, in general terms, to the role they are supposed to play. The finding that they are the key figures when it comes to efficiency and effectivity of schools has been evidenced by numerous foreign studies, both theoretical and empirical (Leithwood et al., 2004; Hattie, 2009). In a Czech context there has been a lack of systematic research on and attention to headteachers. Of course, a variety of studies have referred to the work of headteachers in more or less detail, but ours is unique in the fact that the headteacher is the focal point of each chapter.

In our opinion, headteachers are rather unjustly neglected in Czech educational research. As the case may be, they are the focus of our attention for factual reasons. Our starting point is the results of the surveys mentioned above, relating to an informal group of educators, practitioners and politicians known as the movement for efficient schools. These results show that each school has its own strong influence on the quality of education. An important determinant for this is the role of school leaders. In the context of Czech education, the extent of their role is heightened further by the relatively large autonomy the schools and their headteachers have in almost every domain of their operation. In other words, whether the freedom that a school enjoys can be meaningfully used in pursuit of its purpose depends very much on the headteacher. At the same time, the core activity is teaching. So the approach and work of headteachers in leadership and management of the educational process is a subject that interconnects practically all parts of our publication. The operationalization of our approach is based on two dominant concepts of leadership processes for which the impact on pupils' academic results has been empirically evidenced abroad: the theory of educational leadership, inclining to stress direct influence of leaders and leadership on learning, and the transformational model, postulating indirect influence through teachers and organizational conditions and structures. However, the aim of our investigation is not to decide whether teachers influence the efficiency of schools directly by their activities or indirectly by exerting influence upon teachers. In fact we think that both are true, and this is reflected in the research tools we have used.

As to how much the headteachers of Czech basic schools affect pupils' academic results, our data indicate that their activities and the approach they take to their role are important predictors of efficiency. In the context of Czech education, we consider this a strong result, for it verifies empirically a hypothesis that has long been postulated in theory. Another interesting result shows that the influence of headteachers increases as pupils rise through the school. In other words, the intensity of headteachers' work affects the academic results of pupils in the 9th grade more than of those in the 5th. It seems that this may be related with the impact of external differentiation, which is a typical feature of Czech elementary schooling. We have tried to compensate for the limitations of this quantitative analysis by a qualitative analysis of specific headteacher procedures in educational leadership. In this context, this has proved to be an important finding, showing that the approaches chosen by headteachers for leadership in the educational process are reflected in the work and satisfaction levels of teachers. At the same time, we have proved that the concept of educational leadership is related to the headteacher's dominance in the school's operation, his/her ability to manage pressure of expectations (external expectations in particular) and his/her personal disposition for leadership.

As mentioned earlier, we discuss, too, other topics related to headteachers and their roles, most notably headteachers' professional development. The career paths of Czech headteachers we have been able to identify are not linear, of course. We have recorded various sine curves, but we have also found and described important moments in essential professional progress the headteachers in

our sample have experienced. Of course, changes in their approach to the role and educational leadership are closely linked to this.

This publication shows in various places why we consider it important to understand the daily job of headteachers in more detail. We have accentuated the recognition of activities focused on teaching and the processes of learning. The impact of headteachers' approach on the life of the school (which does not mean pupils' academic results only), as we have identified it, is significant. It is evident that our methodologies and other limitations may have restricted our interpretations. After all, in regard to the subtopics, we have illustrated that not even the professional discourse is unanimous as to what is important and how the role should be played. Nevertheless, it our immodest claim that this publication is a basis for more research.