

Culture of the Czech School: On Particular Areas of its Manifestation

Milan Pol, Lenka Hloušková, Petr Novotný, Jiří Zounek

Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno, the Czech Republic

Introduction

Dealing with the results of an advanced stage of a three-year-study, this contribution is aimed at a detailed recognition of some areas of school operation, identified earlier by a preliminary research¹. Five areas, or subjects, are analysed: *consent in main principles of school operation, creation and attainment of a path the school is to walk on (school vision), openness of the school towards its environment, stimulating milieu to learning and teaching, and school management*. These subjects have been contemplated by the respondents (basic school head-teachers in the Czech Republic) from two viewpoints: First, as their general opinion on the importance of such areas, on the aptness of work contents, on the involvement of various participants in school life, and on adequate forms of support to schools. Second, the respondents have remarked on the situation in their own schools, in all five areas, commenting on both their successful practice and the blind spots they can see in such context.

Research sample characteristics

The questionnaires were distributed in mid May 2002, for the data collection to be completed by 30 June 2002. The addresses to send the questionnaires to were obtained from the official database of Prague's Information and Education Institute (ÚIV). 500 questionnaires in their printed form were sent by ordinary mail, with a stamped envelope to reply. Of these, 124 questionnaires were returned, constituting a respondency rate of 24.8 %. Another 500 questionnaires were distributed by e-mail², also using the ÚIV database. 41 e-mail questionnaires were sent back, plus 3 more were printed by the respondents and sent back by ordinary mail, thus making up a respondency rate of 8.8 %.

For the evaluation, it has been decided to sum up both forms, on condition that they do not largely differ in their essential parameters, such as the values of identification variables or the values of key variables for the evaluation. So we have statistically assessed the differences (or accords) within both types of response, printed or electronic. The only statistically important difference we could identify between these two groups was in the population of the place of the school: Schools in towns of 2,000 to 20,000 inhabitants tended to answer the electronic questionnaires (56.8 %, as opposed to 32.5 % replies to printed ones). No other differences between the groups could be found, so we could combine them into one batch, to be quantitatively and qualitatively analysed.

¹ Based on the preliminary research, the set of ten areas of school operation was reduced to four (consent in principles, school vision, openness, management) and one area was added, the stimulating milieu to learning and teaching, this one being immediately linked to the very existence of schools. (See Pol, Milan; Hloušková, Lenka; Novotný Petr; Václavíková, Eva; Zounek Jiří: *Kultura české školy a strategie jejího rozvoje – k předvýzkumné fázi projektu [Culture of the Czech School and its Development Strategies: On the preliminary stage of the project]*. In: *Nové možnosti vzdělávání a pedagogický výzkum, sborník příspěvků z IX. konference ČAPV, Ostrava 2001*, pp. 244-247.)

² Observations on electronic questioning to be published later.

In total, 168 questionnaires were returned. Our questions were answered by 61 women (36.3 % of all respondents) and 100 men (59.5 %), 7 respondents not specifying their sex.

Of the research sample, 40.5 % had been in the head-teacher's position for more than 10 years (68 respondents). As for their starting years, most of them entered their positions between 1990 and 1992 (33.3 %, 56 persons) or after 1999 (23.8 %, 40 head-teachers): the data apparently follow the "periods in office", as large changes were incited in 1990-1991. The longest period in office was a head-teacher's who had started in 1969, while the youngest respondent in office had only started in 2002. 11 respondents (6.5 %) did not specify when they had entered their positions.

Two items of the questionnaire were focused on how big the addressed schools were. As for the number of pupils, there were 29.8 % (50) schools of under 200 pupils, 31.5 % (53) schools between 200 and 400, and 35.7 % (60) schools of over 400 pupils. Five schools did not specify (3.0 %). Similarly, numbers of staffs were investigated. Most of the replies came from schools of 11 to 20 teachers (36.3 %, 61 schools). Also, relatively numerous in our sample were those of 21 to 30 teachers (30.8 %, 45). Schools of 31 to 40 teachers were represented by 17.3 % (29 schools).

Another point of our interest was the location of the school. Most data came from villages and towns of a population between 500 and 2,000 (30.4 %, 51 schools) and from towns of 2,000 to 20,000 inhabitants (39.3 %, 66). Fewer answers came from towns of 20,000 to 100,000 (13.7 %, 23), even less so from villages under 500 inhabitants (6.0 %) and cities over 100,000 (5.4 %). The city of Prague was considered as a separate category, the capital being represented in our batch by 9 schools (5.4 %).

How essential do the head-teachers consider the subjects under discussion?

Through this question (item) we have endeavoured to ascertain the head-teachers' opinions on how important, or essential, these areas are for schools in general, i.e. not just for the one they administer. We have tried to explore the general (generally educational) importance of the areas under discussion.

Each area was presented to the respondents along with a 9-degree-scale (see example below) to indicate their opinion on the importance of such area, between *very essential* and *fully irrelevant*.

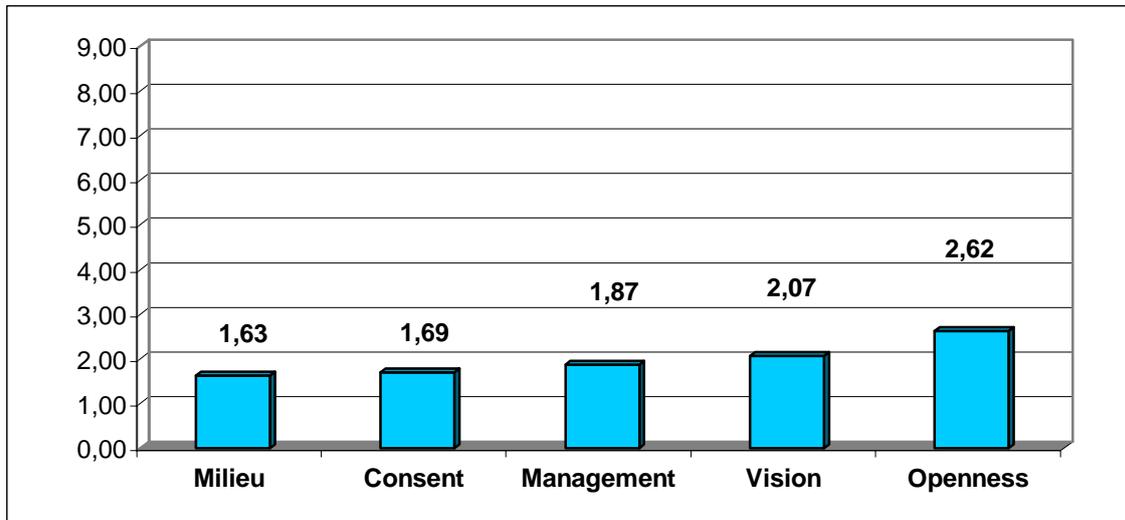
I regard people's consent in main principles of school operation, as for schools in general, as (mark the appropriate):

| | | |
|----------------|------------------|------------|
| very essential | fully irrelevant | don't know |
| 1 2 3 4 5 6 | 7 8 9 | 10 |

Generally, the average values we have obtained show that the head-teachers do regard all the presented areas highly significant. As a real key factor, stimulating milieu to learning and teaching was regarded very important (average 1.63), as was the consent in main principles of school operation (average 1.69). Another area of rather high importance was school management (average 1.87). Regarded by the respondents as a little less important was the creation of vision (2.07 on average). Relatively least weighty turned out to be the school's openness towards its environment (average 2.62). The results indicate that head-teachers would see more importance in areas connected to the internal operation of the school

(focusing on targets inside the school), while an area oriented rather outside the school ended up as relatively least relevant.

Diagram 1: How important the selected areas are for schools in general



The below text analyses the results more precisely. To make the assessment clearer, the 9-degree-scale may be narrowed into five grades: values of 1 or 2 showing that the respondents regard the area as a *very essential* factor, values of 3 and 4 indicating the area as *highly relevant*, 5 meaning absence of strong opinion on the matter, while those who have chosen 6 or 7 think that the area is *rather irrelevant*, 8 or 9 expressing *full irrelevancy* of the matter for schools in general.

The highest rate of agreement was given to the statement that **it is important to create a stimulating milieu to learning and teaching**: 85.7 % head-teachers consider it very essential, another 10.1 % of them regarding it highly relevant. A mere 2.4 % tend to think that the above is a rather or fully irrelevant matter.

The consent, of all those involved, in the main principles of school operation is also considered substantial. 79.8 % head-teachers believe it very essential, another 17.9 % saying it is highly relevant. The head-teachers have shown a relatively unanimous tendency to regard such consent in the principles of school operation very important, for irrelevancy was not adjudicated to this item at all.

Head-teachers also consider the area of **school management** relatively far-reaching, as 75.6 % respondents see it very essential. For 19.9 % of them, the matter is highly relevant, while 4 respondents (2.4 %) consider it rather or fully irrelevant.

More departure from general relevancy comes with the next area, consisting in the **creation and materialization of a path the school walks on, namely the vision of the school**. According to our head-teachers, this topic is not that significant as previous ones. Still, 70.2 % respondents think it very essential, and 23.8 %, highly relevant. Other options are not frequent, but three respondents (1.8 %) see it rather irrelevant and one, fully irrelevant.

The **openness towards the school's environment** is regarded least important of all our options, mere 47.6 % head-teachers considering it very essential. Quite many, though, have chosen the grade of highly relevant, 42.3 %. Strong opinion is absent with 11 respondents (6.5

%), this rate being the highest of all areas under discussion. Three head-teachers rank this area among those rather irrelevant for school operation.

Let us now have an even closer look at the three areas regarded as the most significant³. How do the head-teachers actually conceive them? We can partly find out thanks to a section of the questionnaire in which the respondents were to select some peculiar characteristics of those areas (up to five, of given sets). Thus, according to our respondents, the *consent in main principles of school operation* should mainly be related to:

- the educative pursuit (selected by 78.0 % respondents)
- the schooling pursuit (73.8 %)
- relations between adults and pupils (63.1 %)
- the relationship between school and parents (56.5 %)

As for the *stimulating milieu to learning and teaching*, most respondents urge concentration on:

- pupils' motivation (81.5 %)
- a milieu of confidence and partnership (70.8 %)
- teacher's creativity (54.8 %)

Ranking third, *school management* ought to be, according to head-teachers, focused on:

- efficient communication (72.6 %)
- the creation of an operation line of the school (55.4 %)

How do the head-teachers perform in the subjects under discussion (employ the potential they provide)?

This item was meant for the head-teachers to describe the actual situation in their schools, for all five areas. What we were interested in is the actual situation in the implementation of such subjects, in their respective schools.

The respondents were given a scale (see example below) to indicate the percentage of the implementation as related to what they imagine ideal, their images of perfection being represented by 100 %.

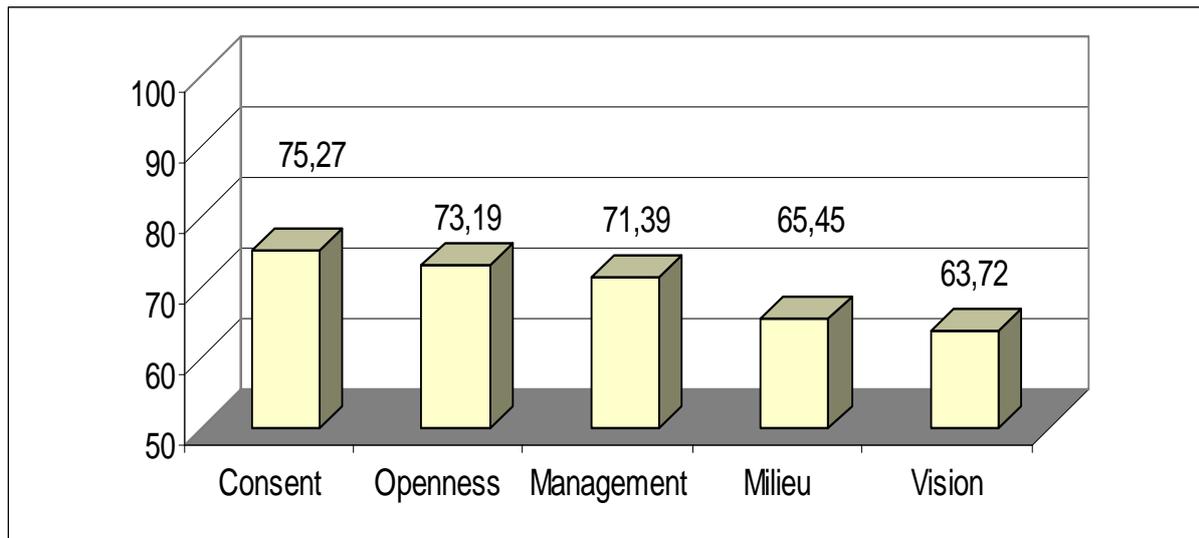
How much people's consent in main principles of school operation is there at your school, in your opinion? (Cite your judgement in percentage, 100 % corresponding to what you consider perfect.)

| | | | | |
|----|-----|-----|-----|------|
| 0% | 25% | 50% | 75% | 100% |
|----|-----|-----|-----|------|

Generally speaking, head-teachers seem to be positive about what is happening in their schools. They are getting on best in the consent in the school's main principles (average of all respondents 75.27), followed by the openness towards outer environment (73.19). They also seem to feel successful in school management (71.39). A little worse is the result for the stimulating milieu to learning and teaching (65.45). What the schools are least successful in is the implementation of visions (63.72 % of the ideal situation).

³ Note that the first round of area classification by importance was carried out during a preliminary stage of the research, see Pol, M., Hloušková, L., Novotný, P., Václavíková, E., Zounek, J.: *Culture of the Czech School and its Development Strategies*. A contribution for the European conference on educational Research (ECER) 2001, Lille, France, 5-8 Sept. 2001.

Diagram 2: How successful the respondents are at their own schools



To easily make a deeper analysis, let us assume that if a head-teacher feels the ideal situation to be implemented by 75 per cent or more, the reality is seen as approaching perfection. On the other hand, a result under 75 per cent means that the head-teacher's idea of perfection seems to be difficult to fulfil. To depict a comprehensive image, lowest and highest results for all areas are mentioned.

The head-teachers' ideas are best accomplished within the area of the **consent in main principles of school operation**. As many as 76.2 % respondents feel that their schools are approaching perfection. The worst result was with a respondent who perceived a consent rate of 30 %. At two schools, on the contrary, full consent of 100 % was achieved.

Also, the **openness towards the school's environment** is an area in which the head-teachers' ideas seem to be well implemented. 67.3 % respondents regard themselves successful. Seven of them accomplish the openness perfectly, while two are rather unsuccessful, getting on at mere 35 %.

Ranked third in the respondents' assessment is **school management**. The materialization of this subject can still be considered relatively successful, though impediments seem to be more frequent. 58.3 % head-teachers are close to the ideal situation, having marked 75 or more percent. Interestingly, one respondent feels to be successful at 20 % only, while two seem to be able to fully accomplish their ideas, at 100 %.

The assessment further shows that the head-teachers regard themselves less successful in what we had labelled **stimulating milieu to learning and teaching**. Merely 42.3 % respondents consider themselves successful in accomplishing their ideas. Similar to the previous question, one respondent labelled his success as 20 % only. On the other hand, three of them proclaim to be implementing their ideas completely.

What the head-teachers succeed least in is the implementation of their idea of the **creation and materialization of the vision of the school**. Only 38.1 % respondents say they are approaching their goals. Five respondents (3 %) can realize their visions at 25 % only. Interestingly, one respondent can see a 100-per-cent accomplishment of his vision, two more arriving, all the more, at 120 %.

Detected relations among variables

It seems that there is a certain circle of head-teachers who have reacted likewise, in pinpointing alike subjects as essential. Generally, such respondents are therefore more sensitive to culture-related parameters of school operation. This is proved by the positive co-relations in the assessment of the importance of our subjects, see Chart 1.

Chart 1: Co-relations among assessments of the importance of school culture areas

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. |
|---------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. Consent | 1.00 | 0.46 | 0.27 | 0.43 | 0.43 |
| 2. Vision | 0.46 | 1.00 | 0.41 | 0.44 | 0.57 |
| 3. Openness | 0.27 | 0.41 | 1.00 | 0.36 | 0.34 |
| 4. Milieu | 0.43 | 0.44 | 0.36 | 1.00 | 0.58 |
| 5. Management | 0.43 | 0.57 | 0.34 | 0.58 | 1.00 |

Also, for the assessment of actual situations in schools, the parameters could have been expected to be interconnected by positive co-relations. Consequently, this has been proved, see Chart 2. These co-relations are very strong with the three areas for which we have ascertained higher ranking of importance, i. e. *consent in main principles of school operation*, *stimulating milieu to learning and teaching*, and *school management*. This can be interpreted in two ways, depending on the assumed direction of the relation among variables: either the head-teacher perceives the state of two key areas as very good (consent, stimulating milieu), generating thus the positive assessment of his/her school management. Or, the head-teacher concentrates on what he/she feels substantial, engendering thus the improvement of such areas. On top of that, a combination of both processes is possible.

Chart 2: Co-relations among assessments of the actual state of school culture areas

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. |
|---------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. Consent | 1.00 | 0.39 | 0.23 | 0.42 | 0.52 |
| 2. Vision | 0.39 | 1.00 | 0.30 | 0.30 | 0.33 |
| 3. Openness | 0.23 | 0.30 | 1.00 | 0.23 | 0.23 |
| 4. Milieu | 0.42 | 0.30 | 0.23 | 1.00 | 0.51 |
| 5. Management | 0.52 | 0.33 | 0.23 | 0.51 | 1.00 |

Then, could the quality of the performance within such areas depend on how long a head-teacher was in office? Should the head-teacher's efforts be manifested in an improved state of the key areas? Unfortunately, our research has not proved this, the only statistically relevant co-relation with the head-teacher's period in office being the value of 0.21 concerning the *consent*.

Conclusion

As has been mentioned, the questionnaire makes the respondents meditate in two levels. The first deals with the importance of certain subjects for the general functioning of schools. The second represents the judgement of actual situations in respective schools.

As for the first level of opinions, a stimulating milieu to learning and teaching, and a consent of those involved, seem to be of predominant importance. Such consent should

mainly concern the schooling and educative pursuits of the school and the relationship between adults and pupils. These two areas, and processes, should become the focus of powerful managerial actions, taking advantage of efficient communication.

The second level of opinions is a comparison between real situations and the head-teachers' ideas of perfection. Seemingly, most approaching the ideal situation is the openness of the school towards its environment and, mainly, the consent in main principles of school operation. However, why is it that the worst judgement comes for how visions are treated? Is that because the work with visions, being rather vague, suffers under the factual everydayness of school-life reality? Or, is it a question of balancing a long-term development concept of the school (vision work) and the pressure of short-term or mid-term reflections? Is the vision perhaps dispensed in all other areas, while an explicit question loses its accent? Or, does a vision grow up as a product of all the other areas?

A comparison of these two levels of contemplation uncovers a number of possible relations. For instance, the least important area for schools in general seems to be the openness towards external environment. At the same time, though – perhaps as a paradox – head-teachers say that the relation between parents and the school should be governed by principles in which consent is necessary. And, viewing their own schools, they judge this matter as closest to perfection. Does it mean, perhaps, that the relation between the school and the public is a selective one?

It could be supposed that, from the head-teachers' viewpoint, management would become top priority. Yet, management does not rank very first. In both levels of contemplation, this area is in the third place (provably interrelated to previous two areas).

Thus, the questionnaire survey reveals several options of understanding particular areas of school operation and school culture. The analysis of further findings and of data obtained through other research techniques will hopefully help us to better grasp and gradually unravel the culture of the Czech school.