FOUNDATION AND MANAGEMENT OF NEW PRIVATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN CZECHIA: PILOT STUDY

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Abstract

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of new private primary schools founded in Czechia. The founders of these schools are also principals. The aim of this paper is to describe their motivation for founding such schools and present the challenges they had to face, especially from a personal and managerial point of view. This qualitative study used a grounded theory methodology to analyse respondents' life story interviews. The birth of children was the biggest impulse for the creation of the school. The well-used managerial tools are the definition and sharing of values (freedom) and fulfilling the vision of the school. Respondents profit greatly from their previous work experience (NGO, entrepreneurship). One big challenge can be seen in communication and discussions with parents. This article fills an empty space in the society-wide discussion on the approval of new private primary schools. The motivation of the respondents is clearly to offer a different educational approach (not only for their own children).

Keywords: Life story, New school, Primary school, Private school, School management

JEL Code: I20, I21

Introduction

In the Czech Republic a new phenomenon has emerged of founding new private primary schools. Naturally, the first primary schools were founded after the fall of the communist regime in 1989 (most of them later - 1996). But from 2011, a new wave started again. All data can be seen in Table 1. The Czech Ministry of Education is in a complicated position because it has to approve or turn down requests to establish new private primary schools. These new schools are checked by the Czech School Inspectorate. The principals were asked about their reasons for founding these new schools. Reasons given were the need for an alternative approach (64.9%), the extension of an educational institution (24.3%) and dissatisfaction with the quality of local schools (21.6%) (Zatloukal, Andrys, & Bartoš, 2017).

Tab. 1: Overview of the total number of primary schools, 2009-2018

	Total number of private primary schools	Total number of primary schools	% of private primary schools
2017/2018	196	4155	4,7%
2015/2016	145	4115	3.5%
2013/2014	105	4095	2.6%
2011/2012	85	4111	2.1%
2009/2010	72	4125	1.7%

source: MŠMT ČR, 2018

The Czech phenomenon of founding new private primary schools is quite unique in a worldwide context and specific research in this field is rare. It is important to discover the motivation behind founding new primary schools as well as the principals' private and professional backgrounds (life stories). This is a valuable tool for policy makers, parents, teachers and other stakeholders in their quest to ensure better decision making. It has also been proven that good principals make good schools and that management and leadership styles definitely matter (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Hitt & Tucker, 2015; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

From the descriptions of career paths, new principals state that they enter the profession largely unprepared (Ummanel, McNamara, & Stynes, 2016, pp. 12–13) and have a lack of readiness and skills regarding a substantial part of their new work and tasks (Earley & Bubb, 2013; Pol, Hloušková, Novotný, & Sedláček, 2009).

Czech principals are in a specific position because they need to have professional competences in the field of education and training on one hand and competence in school management on the other. New principals (former teachers) face several issues at the beginning of their new career, e.g.: lack of preparation, feelings of isolation and professional inexperience (Voda, 2015, pp. 189–190).

This article provides a complementary approach to this topic because there are many decisions and questions: Should new private primary schools be approved? Should you place your child in a new school? Should you accept a job as a teacher? Obviously, there are even more. The results section in this paper is divided into arisen categories and private and professional life-stories. The aim of this paper is to reveal the motivation for founding new private primary schools, describe respondents' personal and professional life stories and discover the challenges they had to face, especially from a personal and managerial point of

view. This paper is a pilot study and conveys a part of the first results of the large-scale research carried out in the field of school management.

1 Materials and Methods

The aim of this paper is to reveal the motivation for founding new private primary schools and present the challenges the respondents had to face from a personal and managerial point of view. To accomplish this goal the author selected a qualitative approach and adapted the method of life story interviews, which has already been used for other successful research papers (Konvalinka, 2017). In this article, the author introduces 3 semi-structured interviews (around 53 pages of material), which represent a pilot study. The research has the following research questions: 1) What is the motivation for founding new private primary schools? 2) What are the personal and professional life stories of the founders? 3) What are the challenges they had to face from a personal and managerial point of view? As a methodology of the research a grounded theory is used. All interviews were transcribed and analysed in Atlas.ti software. The data were open coded and conceptualized, from this the first patterns and categories arose (Holton & Walsh, 2017). The most important and interesting open codes and categories will be discussed, representing the most frequent or those with the greatest emphasis placed on them.

During the interviews, the respondents were asked to describe their personal and professional life stories, various challenges and other matters concerning leadership and management. All three interviews were carried out in 2017 at an average duration of 91 minutes. The respondents were randomly chosen principals (one vice-principal) of newly created private primary schools in Czechia. They had to be in the position for at least 1.5 years and must have participated during the process of the foundation of the school; no other specific criteria were required. Only schools founded in 2010 or later were added to the data sample.

2 Results

The research is qualitative and the results cannot be generalised, it provides scientific evidence from 2 randomly selected principals and 1 vice-principal. From all of the interviews it is evident that the foundation of the school was connected with a vast amount of work, it was not easy and the founders took a big risk. The founders and future principals/vice-principal did not do it for money (one even worked voluntarily for some time). One of the

motivational factors mentioned as a reason for the foundation and management of new private primary schools was creating the best possible school environment for children and allowing children to grow up as free, independent and responsible individuals, who will be able to make the world a better place to live in. The decisive moment for formulating these ideas was the birth of their children. They are so confident about the results that they let their children attend their own schools. As managers they had to face complicated challenges and they have definitively been able to improve and learn from their past. The question of whether new private primary schools should be approved or not is more complex, but from the point of view of the personal and professional life stories of the selected principals and vice-principal, there is no doubt that they work hard, do their best and have many satisfied children and parents at their schools. They manage to attract very good, highly motivated teachers, including men, which is not easy. They are also mature and have relevant and interesting experience from business and administration, entrepreneurship and NGO. From the three conducted interviews it is evident that previous work experience in a profession other than teaching is beneficial. Entrepreneurial or managerial professions are particularly relevant or at least the observations of professionals are beneficial.

As for instructional goals, values come before knowledge and it is important to balance relationships and performance. The important values are: freedom, good relationships, healthy self-confidence and abilities of children to know themselves and formulate their own opinions. The main goal of these institutions is neither money nor an attempt to rival classic primary schools, but to expand the offer of primary schools and give parents more choice. They do not accept all children and they even state that their school is not suitable for all parents. Actually, the connecting element is that children, parents and the school are all included in the admission process as well as during the whole study time.

The birth of children – a big impulse for the creation of schools was the given respondent having his/her own children. One aspect in this reasoning was the absence of free places in nursery schools or the lack of alternative nursery schools in the neighbourhood. Some respondents firstly established a nursery school and let their children go there and then when their children grew up, they founded a primary school. Another viewpoint could well be that it was the beginning of the inner transformation of the principal. Respondents started to search for possibilities to fulfil their potential and began to think about what meaningful schooling should look like.

Values – one of the most well spread open codes. All respondents talked about values (especially freedom). They mentioned them in relation to personal stories, in relation to

instructional leadership and also in relation to human resource management and management as such. Challenges – the most complicated challenges were connected with communication and interventions by parents. Parents quite often tended to influence processes and decision making in schools.

One interesting fact is that the schools of all of the interviewed respondents have no lack of children, in fact demand outstrips supply. For all interviewed respondents it was their first experience in this role. Some respondents gave up their dream jobs and although they had families, risked everything to start a new career, regardless of the fact that this career is not really a very profitable one. Some of the respondents saw a decrease in their earnings.

2.1 Principal 1

This respondent had not planned to become a principal at the beginning. He became one purely due to circumstances, he took over the school after it had been abandoned by the management and administration and the risk arose that the whole institution would be wound up. The respondent took a gamble and took on the first principal role of his life. It was a really courageous decision because he already had a family and the job of his dreams and there was no increase in pay at all. The reason he did it was because he felt there was a chance to make the school function exactly how he wanted it to. Fortunately, in the end, everything went well and now the school continues to grow every year.

His priority regarding instructional leadership is values. He says that for him, school and values are inseparable. As to things that helped him a great deal, he spoke of consultations with his very good life mentor and with his father – professional manager.

His school is characterised by a gender balance in the teacher collective, this also represents a good competitive advantage because according to the data of the Ministry of Education, the average proportion of women in primary schools in 2016/2017 stood at 84.8% (MŠMT ČR, 2018). Another strong competence of this principal is his network, the fact that he graduated from the Faculty of Pedagogy and worked as a lecturer for some time. Thanks to the contacts he has made, he was able to establish a team of teachers at the very beginning. Therefore, some of these teachers were already his friends. Obviously, this was an advantage because the traditional process of acceptance is time-consuming and there is a lack of good teachers in the labour market. This is also due to the fact that unemployment in some regions is very low in Czechia.

The respondent adds: "*To do a successful job, a man must know the people he can trust and give responsibility to. I think the experience from the school environment, whether it*

is a grammar school or a university, will allow us to get to know people better than job interviews."

After having his own family, he actually realized what he wanted from the school, the key point is teachers. Teachers who make it worthwhile to send your children there. In his words: "*I mean teachers who simply have such a great value background that children just literally soak it up.*"

The criteria for the acceptance of new teachers is this: "*My criteria for accepting teachers for the school is whether I would want them to teach my children. I think it is a very difficult criterion.*"

It surprised him that he had to explain to parents what competencies he had: "*Quite early on I had to spend some time explaining to parents that it is me (and not them) who manages the school*".

2.2   Principal 2

This respondent, when he was young, created his own company in the field of adult education and consultancy. He ran it for 15 years and it gave him the relevant experience from which he is profiting nowadays, while leading the school. Actually, he mentioned this experience as the thing that helped him the most. Specifically, he mentioned the times when he worked as a contractor for various companies and had the possibility of observing professional managers and experts during their work. For him, the motivation to apply for the position of principal in a newly founded school came from the need to do something which would give him a deeper sense of meaning in his life. The trigger for this inner transformation was his new-born children.

What he describes as one benefit of working at his school is the freedom given to teachers. During the job interview with new teachers, basic rules and parameters are explained and discussed. If there is an agreement on both sides and a teacher is accepted, then the new teacher very often first works with another colleague. He is still somewhat informally observed but has real freedom to choose his own teaching methods and styles, various requisites and tools and try new things. This respondent mentioned that many teachers who apply for a job at his school are leaving traditional schools because it is impossible to include new and innovative methods in teaching. He thinks that principals should be competent and that ministries and founders should give competences and freedom to these principals.

He stated that he saw the process of handing his company over to another manager before becoming a principal as something of a challenge. Generally speaking, he had to

accept the offer of a new job very quickly. During the initial phase of the foundation of the school he faced an important decision regarding the conception of the school, i.e. what it was going to look like, how it was going to be administered and managed and what type of instructional leadership there was going to be. It was a very long and very important process. After some time it is enough for the leaders to just keep an eye on these values and hand them over to new teachers.

The most positive and joyful experience for him is when children show visitors around the school and tell them that it is where they like to go and where they learn a lot. This happens even when the children are chosen at random.

2.3   Vice-principal

In this school the interview was conducted with the vice-principal instead of the principal. The reason why the author did this was that the principals changed several times in this school. The vice-principal was there from the very beginning (including a long preparation period before the start of the first school year), so she was able to answer all questions concerning the school foundation, management, challenges and other related topics.

This school is an example of a school founded by parents/families. At the beginning of the process there were around 12 parents, who helped with the foundation, and afterwards their children were able to attend the school. The work of these people was entirely voluntary and the preparation period took around one year. These families had in common the fact that their children were previously attending an alternative nursery school. So, there was already satisfaction with alternative education and the need for providing continuity for their children. Some of the parents were quite close friends. The respondent was one of these parents and her children attended the school.

When describing her childhood and youth, the respondent mentioned the traditional (authoritative) style of education at school but also at home. Emphasis was placed on grades and obedience, which she considers unfortunate. It took her some time to become herself. This experience is reflected in her instructional leadership as well as school management, the key value in these areas is freedom. She tries to ensure that children have the ability to change the world and not just accept things as they are. For her, founding the school was the most positive experience in her entire professional life.

The school is successful, children are happy and it continues to grow but due to the fact that at the beginning there were around 19 people (parents/families) in the administration, it was not long before the team had to face a few internal conflicts. Some of them were critical

and led to some core members leaving the school. Although some of the internal conflicts were serious, educational processes, lectures and relationships with children were not negatively affected. The author witnessed a speech made by one teacher on a school open day and found that she was clearly a very professional and emphatic person.

One interesting fact worthy of discussion here is the number of times the principal changed. One of the reasons for this was legislation. A principal of a primary school must have pedagogical education (or other relevant level of education) and at least 4 years of experience as a teacher. In addition to this, the founders of the school have their own criteria for the principal – they need him to fulfil the vision of the school or take it on as his own and develop it in the same direction. Unfortunately, all of the principals burned out because the founders never gave up on their requirements.

3   Discussion

In comparison with literature (Pol et al., 2009; Voda, 2015), the respondents did not talk much about lack of experience and skills but more about the benefits they acquired from previous work experience. Strong and reliable leadership brings stability to the whole institution, while weakness could be seen as the division of responsibility among several persons or letting parents "talk" too much to school management. An important aspect in leadership for teachers and children is freedom, which we do not find as a main factor in literature. Defining and passing on the mission and vision of a school is mentioned as a well-used managerial tool. In literature the principal is often a teacher who, after gaining many years of experience, is promoted to the position of principal (Voda, 2015). From the results of this article it is evident that principals of new private primary schools are somewhat different. The respondents did not talk much about overseeing the teachers but were more of an instructional leadership tool, see (Sedláček, 2011), and emphasized the process of selection (of a new teacher) and dismissal of a teacher, if necessary. The motivation of the respondents was to create the best possible school environment for children. In similar research (Pol et al., 2009) principals stressed career development, improving the school and fulfilling the expectations of others.

Conclusion

The main motivation of the respondents was to provide truly professional education for the children. The impulse to start the enterprise was the birth of their children. They benefit from

previous work experience, which helps them to face various challenges. They use the school vision and shared values as the main managerial tools and consider teachers as the key elements of their instructional leadership.

From the interviews it is evident, that it is hard to find a principal, who fulfils all the legal criteria required by the Ministry of Education and has the skills required by the school board. One important factor for any future decisions by the Ministry of Education on approving new private primary schools is seeing clearly evident examples of good practice, when such primary schools attract principals (managers) with previous successful experience in entrepreneurship, business and administration or NGO. New principals may well have similar issues as mentioned above, i.e. communication and discussions with parents and the need to dismiss specific teachers. The best means of hiring new teachers is long term networking. Further research could focus on collecting stories from principals of public schools and then comparing them with those of the respondents in this paper or alternatively, using mixed methods and concentrating more on hiring new teachers or communication and discussions with parents.

Acknowledgment

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