



Country Background Report Slovakia

1. Background – everyday reality versus political framework?

One of the attributes of the public education of Slovakia, and also an important aspect of this report is that the political, economic and social transformation starting from the revolution in 1989 is a very slow and halting process full of controversies and with a lack of a clear development strategy based on professional and social support.

The Act on Public Education approved in 1984 and based on the socialist ideology was recently altered on the 1st September 2008 by the new law (Act no. 245/2008 Tt. sz. on Pedagogy and Education).

The changes in educational matters introduced in 1989 have left the centralized content of the national curriculum almost untouched for two decades. The change to a new professional educational philosophy to the so called *double pole regulation* of the educational content (as part of the Act on Public Education and as the consequence of it) also occurred only recently, in September 2008.

In Slovakia a deliberate system of teachers' training is still missing. The amount of the grant rendered by the state for financing in-service training is still not in consonance with the importance of the matter. Moreover the allocation of the less substantive subsidies is not transparent enough.

The reforms of the educational system (until now) have mainly been affecting the framework of education and its system of conditions (establishment, maintaining, managing, operating, financing).

One of the most relevant reforms in education and school management following the revolution in 1989 was that gradually from 1991 institutions of public education have become independent legal entities. This reform also put an immense burden of tasks on school directors. Most likely even for a layman it would not be hard to see what an extraordinary expense of energy, time, and administration is required to turn an

organization into a legal entity, which entails a myriad of reforms concerning objects (properties, assets, capital), rights and obligations, as well as the school staff.

Furthermore the image is even more overshadowed by the fact that all these changes had to be conducted by school directors who are slightly or not at all in possession of professional teacher or legal-administrational qualifications. By the same token this occurred under minimal state assistance and often in the midst of controversial political concepts.

For the reformation of learning and teaching numerous professional measures are still missing.

Moreover the financing system of current public education (certain amount of grant per student) gives only a very little chance for creating extra sources, in order to reduce the dropouts of disadvantaged students and secure the qualitative educational attention on them.

2. Context

The national context

The foundation of schools can occur by various actors. The school system consists of schools founded either by the state, or the municipality, or the church. Besides, there are also private schools.

In the election of the directors of state and municipal schools the school council makes the final decision. The council consists of the democratically elected parents, teachers and other members of the school staff. Into the council, the maintainer²⁶, the educational district office as well as the supervision of education delegate members. Thus the election occurs in the local environment.

²⁶ **Maintainer:** in the context of Slovakian education system the maintainer is the founder and/or the supporter of the school that decides on and grants financial, material support to the institution, and often practises the rights of the employer over the leaders of the school. By private schools it can be a legal entity or a natural person as well. In traditional schools the maintainer is always the state or the municipality.

The school councils according to the Act on Educational Management must be established in every institution of public education. They are self governing bodies, which have the following rights and duties: 1) they declare and represent the interests of the public, they also represent the students and their parents as well as the rest of the school staff. 2). They practise control of the society in educational matters, 3) they evaluate and render their opinion on the activities of institutions of public education, of maintainers of institutions and the activities of other educational organisations.

The school councils have 5-11 members, depending on the size of the institution and the number of employees. The school council conducts the tendering process, and at the end selects the person proposed for the position. Afterwards the selected/proposed person is recommended to the maintainer (who has originally called for tender). The maintainer according to the law is obliged to appoint the nominee to the position. The maintainer only has the right to reject the nominee if the rules of the election process have been offended.

The applicants must submit with their application a concept of their school leadership. It is also possible to adjust the concept to the local needs and to the expectations of the local school council.

The content of the curricula until September 2008 was strictly centralized. Education was in line with the central curricula, issued and supervised by the Ministry of Education. On the other hand some institutions could choose from different types of curricula.

This rigid regulation has been loosened up by the "framework program" ("state pedagogic program") which is issued by the Ministry and the schools and kindergartens may fulfil it according to their own conception. Thus educational institutions can launch a program based on a development process led by the school director.

The local (regional or municipal) context

In 2002 the implementation of the tasks in the case of grammar schools was devolved to the local, and in the case of secondary schools to the county municipal authorities. The reason for this

solution obviously was that the closer the institution is to the source of the tasks, the better it can handle them. The implementation of tasks should be deployed as close to the users as possible, because on the users' level they have more substantive influence on the decision making and the maintainers can adjust themselves better to the local needs as well. Thus the functioning of the educational institution becomes more rational.

In this regard, as very important units of school management in the local context, the role of school councils has to be described. The school councils according to the Act on Educational Management must be established in every institution of public education. They are self governing bodies, which have the following rights and duties: 1) they declare and represent the interests of the public, they also represent the students and their parents as well as the rest of the school staff. 2). They practise control of society in educational matters, 3) they evaluate and render their opinion on the activities of institutions of public education, of maintainers of institutions and the activities of other educational organisations.

At the municipalities of smaller towns elected bodies govern. Their representatives are elected by the citizens of the town. These bodies consist of the leaders of the municipality such as the major, his/her deputies and the leaders of certain departments such as culture, finance, education etc. From an educational point of view these elected bodies often lack the professionalism that would be necessary for a successful maintenance of the institution.

Under these circumstances cooperation of smaller regions could have a bigger importance, but unfortunately until now they do not have the convenient organization structure. Thus the initiatives stipulating the cooperation of the maintainer municipalities, and the horizontal relationships are very valuable. These initiatives normally come from a central school of the region or from some non-profit organization. However their number is low and their financial possibilities are limited.

To sum up, the Ministry defines the content of the educational programs of the schools. The direct

financing and other economic matters are managed by the office of the region or the town. They define the budget of the schools as well. Thus the directors of the schools report on the functioning of the institutions to the offices. The offices also endorse the investments (constructions, conditioning) and together with the school leader manage the functioning of the schools.

3. School Leadership concepts and practices

Conceptual framework

Act no. 596/2003 specifies the rights and duties of the school directors. Their main duty is the leadership of the institution while at the same time, on educational matters they must adjust their activities and act according to the instructions of the educational minister and adapt the concepts of the educational ministry.

Leaders of schools with a legal personality are also responsible for the economic management of their institution. However the economic independence of educational institutions is limited, because the municipalities bear the responsibility for the maintenance and for the management of the material sources.

Municipalities running more than one institution can only fulfil their duties if they dispose the right of the rearrangement of financial means (if this right is secured by the law). This fact however inevitably limits the economical independence of the schools. The directors of the schools also practise the employer's rights over the teachers and other members of the school staff. (This at the same time is an obligation as well.) However the conditions of employment and waging are strictly centrally regulated.

The teachers are public servants. In the framework of the standards of the obligatory curricula they may choose their educational methods freely. Their direct leader is the director or the deputy director of the school.

The same applies to schools without legal personality, although the employer of the

teachers is the maintainer (i.e. the mayor of the municipality).

The focus on teaching and learning

According to the new educational law, the centralized curriculum system was changed into a local pedagogical program which is based on a state educational program. The right thing is when these local programs are not only elaborated by a few persons, but the whole school staff is involved into its making.

In line with the aspirations of decentralizing, the independence as well as the responsibilities have also been increasing. The leadership competencies have changed. That the decision making has to comply with the local requirements also means that all the consequences have to be endured locally. This certainly makes the decision mechanisms more democratic. In order to prepare the right decisions on a school level and to be active actors in the decision making process, the school directors have to secure the smooth stream of information from and to every directions. This means a new task on the organization level as well.

The transfer of partial authority (to the deputy director, to professional groups, to subject comities) and the support of independent decisions do not mean the vesting of the responsibility as well. Thus in these cases more attention has to be paid to permanent inner controlling and to the organization of quality control. This means extra tasks for the director as well. Taking assignments also raise the self-esteems of the teachers. In the event of his/ her aspirations are successful they even more encouraged by the positive experience.

The evolving sound competition is a visible process on all scopes of education, which also affects the leadership tasks in a great degree as well. To keep up in this race we need to use new, progressive, and sometimes such spectacular pedagogical methods that are able to draw attention on "our school". By giving a free way to the creative teachers to choose their methodology of teaching, new learning models based on spectacular alternative methods can unfold. (For example project teaching, integrated learning, learning in groups, Dalton-plan etc.)

To build cooperation with the parents and to involve them is an important element of the success of the school. Moreover not only the parents can become partners in developing our schools, but also the members of the school councils or the maintainers as well. Another important element of good relationships is the mutual empathy.

Restructuring and re-culturing school organisations

Often it can be seen that – although the right conditions are provided – the director and the deputy directors of the schools do not form a team. A group of people who can effectively solve every problem which it is facing with is understood under the term: “team”. In this context “effectively” means that the solution of tasks or problems compared to the time and the sources given is implemented in the best possible quality. This can only be achieved by the maximum contribution of the team members, which also means the mutual support and common work of/with each other.

The leader of the institution plays a pivotal role in the selection of the members of the team, who have to cooperate and act in view of the interest of the institution. (For example the selection of working teams of a certain school subject, or the organizers of a school event or a conference.) The director has to ensure that the teams effectively and synergistically endeavour towards the common goals, moreover in a way that they can strengthen the effectiveness of each other. Thus working together the result will be better and more than the effectiveness of the total amount of individual efforts would be. A functioning team is a substantive source for the leadership of the school.

In the scope of education, human resources require the most substantive investment. For example the director has to find the most suitable people to achieve the goals. Besides by their selection he/she also has to pay attention to their further development and in-service training.

In order to promote quality work, the achievements of the concrete and clear goals always have to be followed by evaluations based on trust and respect. By the adoption of sound evaluations

new undertakings can be expected on an even higher level of quality.

Establishing and negotiating the direction of the school development

The leaders of the institutions must not forget that they are part of a bigger system, and are in contact with the society of which they serve and which serves them. According to the Act no. 596/2003, the directors have to be in contact with the students, parents, the school councils and the supervision of education as well as with the maintainer, the educational district offices, and the Ministry of Education. With the local community the school, for its own interest, cultivates a relationship based on friendship and empathy.

However there is no simple formula how a positive working environment should be created, in which the school can fulfil the external expectations. Presumably with deliberate steps this goal can also be achieved. For example position papers and constant conversations, especially with influential, dismayed or obdurate colleagues are important. It is also the task of the director to sustain purposefulness and to ensure that the efforts also serve the interests of the students.

To the functioning of every organization multiply interests are attached. A school also has to count with many interests. Therefore besides the students and the parents the schools have to cooperate with the municipalities, with the lower schools where the students come from, with higher education institutions and with the future employers as well.

System leadership and cooperation in networks

Without broad, sound and conscious cooperation with other institutions, autonomy on a school level and the elaboration of learning based leadership is not imaginable.

In the program – making processes on which the schools are currently working, most likely the maintainer local governments (municipalities) and the parents will be the main supporters of the school directors and the school staffs. Since the change of the maintainers, in the past 7 years it has become obvious that the main problems are

the differences and the insufficient professionalism in school management which is at the moment conducted by the almost 3000 school maintainer municipalities. At the same time it has also become clear that for the municipalities the functioning and the improvement of their educational-pedagogical institutes have a great importance. The organizations of the parents are the traditionally most important partners of the schools. The parents are the ones directly affected and interested in the efficiency and in the development of these institutions. Besides the parental organizations the school councils also have the means to include the local requirements and the public interests into the school curricula and to the school management.

There are also huge “additional” profits in the successful program planning facing the schools and school managements. These are namely: the reinforcement of professional dialogue and cooperation; the stronger role of thinking at a regional level and the common planning; horizontal learning and the more intensive endeavours of network building. Perhaps we are not mistaken in saying that in the next era of school management the following elements will have the greatest importance: strategic planning, communication and cooperation, system development and the dissemination of knowledge.

Examples of good practice / success stories

In 2000 in Komárom (Komarno) as a result of private initiative the Mariánium parochial school has been established. The financial support was rendered by the Catholic Church. For four years it has been functioning as a grammar school. After four years a secondary school has been launched also, and in 2008 a kindergarten as well. This example is not a typical one, because after the revolution in 1989 successful investments and developments have been very rare. This is a unique example in Slovakia. Besides, with private support 2 private vocational schools have begun to function. These, in order to be able to keep up with the demands of the market, often change their profile. Also a substantive private support is needed. Moreover students are to pay a tuition fee each year.

4. Recruiting and educating school leaders

Recruitment and retention of leaders

The person who applies to the leadership position does not need to possess any prior qualifications of leadership theory or school management. However, it is advantageous if he/she indicates that he/she has the sufficient professionalism of leading an institution and that he/she aspires to work on the development of the organization with innovation and professionalism and in cooperation with the school staff, the school council, and the maintainer. It is also important that the director should consider others' experiences useful and should ensure the availability to a broader view on education and thus enable the teachers to participate on training courses. The director has to value reflection and self-reflection as well as consider external and internal evaluations alike important. Therefore the school director has to know the processes, methods and techniques with which these evaluations can professionally be made. After their discussion and their common acceptance the director also has to give a great importance to the basic principles of the school. He/she has to make it clear that he/she is committed to the “consumer”.

The election of school leaders

The 5th § of the act number 552/2003 on *The Legal Status of Public Servants* (hereinafter: act on Public Service) declares that the leaders of the organizations under its effect (in our case mainly the directors and deputy directors of kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, as well as directors and deputy directors of other educational-pedagogical institutions) shall be elected by open tenders.

For the position of the director of the school the maintainer of the institution calls for tender. And to other positions (eg. deputy director, main educator, senior teacher, director of the dormitory) the employer (in the case of schools with a legal entity – the director, in case of schools without a legal entity – the maintainer) does.

The tenders of the applicants (contrary to the practice of most of the countries) will be considered neither by the maintainer who calls for

tenders nor by one of the organizations in charge of education but by the *school council*.

As the final act of the tendering process the maintainer appoints the nominee and at the same time lays out the conditions and the term of the employment in a contract.

Since the 1st of January 2004 the term of the appointment has a certain duration of 5 years.

(Note: After the termination of the entrustment, the maintainer of the school has to call for tender. The director in office may tender as well. The act rules not and lays out no limits of the number of periods through which one can be in office.)

Attractiveness of school leadership

Generally speaking the attractiveness of school managing has a strong relationship with the social and financial honour enjoyed by the profession of pedagogy, and this honour relies on the social rank of the school, education, and knowledge themselves. In this regard, just like in all of the post socialist countries, there is a considerable deficit in Slovakia as well.

The "material" payment for the tasks of school directing depends on two elements:

1. the type of the institute, the number of students and the allowance on the number of classes (Compared to the basic obligation of 21-27 classes per week and depending on the type of the school.)
2. salary

The wage-payment of the school directors is composed of three elements:

1. the basic salary of directing, based on the educational salary table (The current amount is circa 700 EUR.)
2. extra salary of directing
3. personal extra salary (The amount is the 100% of the basic salary of directing. It is an optional salary and defined by the maintainer or the employer)

It is important to note that considering the low amount of central financial support the

production of salary and functioning costs means significant problems to most of the schools. Not to mention here the costs of protection of substance and of securing the sources of institutional development. Therefore the above mentioned 3rd element (the personal extra salary) is normally not more than 15-20%. More than that can only be rendered by the maintainers in better developed economic regions, mostly in bigger cities.

The salaries of school directors (in average 800-850 EUR per month) should be compared to the average salary of 680 EUR of teachers and to the average national salary of 712 EUR.²⁷ The shortfall of the wage-payment of school directors is significant compared to both: to the leaders of the economic sphere in Slovakia as well as to the directors in similar positions in more developed countries.

In general there are not many applicants. The prestige of the school leader position is not high, the salary is not sufficient. In recent years the tasks of school leaders have become merely to keep institutions functioning and secure the salary of its staff. The financial situation of the education issue in general is very bad.

National structures of pre-service, induction and in-service education of school leaders

As aforesaid, when an applicant first applies to the school leader position he/she does not need to possess any prior qualifications of leadership theory or school management. However in 2 years after his/her appointment he/she is obliged to pass the necessary exams and attain a leadership qualification.

Regulation no. 42/1996 of the Ministry lays down the condition system of the so-called qualification exam no. I and the qualification exam no. II. Passing the qualification exam no. I is a precondition for applying to a school director position for a second term. Obtaining this first exam also places the teacher in a higher wage level. (This latter does not necessarily apply to passing the qualification exam no. II).

²⁷ data of the 3rd quarter of 2008, source: Statistical Office

The Code Labour (Zákoník práce) obliges the employers to enable the employees to participate in training courses. In the case of the teachers the normative grant rendered to the school includes only a small amount to this purpose, which only covers the expenses of the substitution of the teacher and his/her travel costs.

The 5th paragraph of the regulation discusses the training courses for teachers in leadership positions. According to that, the following institutions are entitled to conduct courses for leaders in public education: methodology-pedagogic state centres, institutions of state pedagogic, and universities. The paragraph does not specify which institution is obliged to elaborate, accredit, and to offer leadership courses. Neither does it refer to the financial backgrounds.

However according to the act the appointed school director, within a year of his/her accession to office, is obliged to start to participate in leadership training. (The nature of the training is vaguely specified in the regulation.) The leader should accomplish the training within 2 years. Thus it would be the duty of the ministry to implement the leadership courses and should render financial support from the budget to the accredited leadership training programs.

The Educational Ministry should devote more professional attention to the organization and supply of in-service training of the teachers (including effective and up-to-date leadership training as well). It should be financed more substantively according to a clear and transparent regulation.

Unfortunately, in the last decade since the regulation has come into force (in 1996) the training of leaders has become totally the monopoly of methodology-pedagogic state centres, entailing lots of negative consequences. The state pedagogic institution, because of its other tasks and because of the low number of its personnel does not deal with leadership training. Although according to the regulation the universities may conduct training and thus could become competitors of the methodology centres, they do not receive any funds from the educational governance or from the state budget. Therefore training for school leaders is rarely offered by higher educational institutions.

Under the current circumstances especially teachers of national minority schools are in a difficult situation, because for them the pedagogic-methodology centres, which are maintained by the state, do not offer an in-service training in the language of their school. (For it is not a state obligation, they do not have a separate budget for this object, there are no employees, who would be acquainted with the language of minority schools.)

The 5th paragraph of the regulation of the Ministry no. 42/1996 defines the main scopes of pre-service and in-service training as: „The content of the training aim at the acquirement of the newest pedagogic, psychological and leadership theories.”

The regulation also lays down that the training program is to be approved by the Minister and that the leadership training terminates with the defence of a final thesis and with the passing of the final exam.

The training of the 5 methodology-pedagogic state centres are similar in the content and are based on the following topics:

The humanization of the school – Development of human resources – Management and financing – The pedagogical and psychological aspects of leadership- The development of the personal and professional competency of the school director.

The duration of the programs is between 200-240 sessions.

It should be noted here that, according to the current regulations, the school directors who have absolved the training, are not obliged to participate in any further training. According to the new Act on the Career of Teachers, which is currently under construction, the certificate obtained on the training will be valid for 7 years. Afterwards the school director shall participate in a so-called innovation leadership training which at the end renders a new certificate valid for the next 5 years.

Coaching and other forms of support

For the school leaders it is highly important to be well acquainted with the legal environment.

In this, the magazine ŠKOLA, which not only contains laws, rules and regulations, but also gives examples of practice in the fields of education, pedagogic and financing, can be a useful support for the leaders, because this sort of media helps them to always be up-to-date on legal issues concerning education.

The regional and national professional conferences are the fastest and most effective possibilities to learn and collect new information. With topics that are really important to the school leaders the ministry and the pedagogic-methodology centres rarely organize conferences. In this field the activities of civil organisations and universities are much more flexible and up-to-date.

The common programs of the teachers and associations of school leaders can support learning, based on exchanging experiences on a regional or a national level. These work especially effectively in the case of the school leaders' associations of private, church and state-operated secondary schools.

In the current situation the so desirable cooperation in the smaller regions among school leaders, teachers and schools has unfortunately no tradition or systematic framework. However, a few civil organizations still promote the cooperation of the schools and the horizontal small region relationships.

The civil organizations, mostly with the support of foundations, that also help the school leaders, often offer conflict management training, short term manager training and tender writing courses.

5. Conclusion: challenges, areas of innovation and future perspective

To achieve autonomy at school level in line with the legal environment is a challenge to both, the whole school staff as well as the leadership of the institution. Furthermore, more and more responsibility falls on other groups and bodies as well (parents, school council and maintainer).

Effective system development and innovation can only materialize with perfect cooperation among the aforementioned groups. Besides in order to achieve correct, continuous and reliable cooperation, the school leadership, the school staff, the school council and the maintainer has to focus on the mobilization of the inner resources and reserves.

According to the law, the school council and the maintainer are required to elaborate the conception of the school leadership before as well. Often because of insufficient professionalism and creativity they put other preferences before this requirement. Therefore it would be important either by the means of remote education or by organizing opportunities for exchanging experiences to promote and to extend the horizontal cooperation among school councils and maintainers, to organize their training and to foster the regional cooperation as well.

In the training courses the improvement of creativity, cooperation and continuity should be emphasized. Conferences on a regional or a national level are excellent opportunities for exchanging experiences.

Some civil organizations are pioneers in this field. *The Conservative Institute* in Slovakian language, and the *Association of Hungarian Teachers in Slovakia*, the *Comenius Pedagogic Institute of the University of Selye*, the *Forum Institute*, *In Hungarian on the Homeland Association* in Hungarian language have organized conferences for promoting the abovementioned goals.

Apart from the civil organizations, we expect action from the Educational Ministry as well towards not only the school leaders and the teachers, but also towards the self-governing school organizations (school councils) and towards the maintainers of the schools.

Our personal perspective is to contribute actively to the renewal of human resources in public education.

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Appendix

Legal situation

1. Act no.245/2008 on education and pedagogic
2. Act no. 552/2003 on public labour
3. Act no. 596/2003 on the state governance of educational matters and on the self-governance of schools
4. Regulation of the Ministry no. 41/1996 on the professional and pedagogic eligibility of teachers
5. Regulation of the Ministry no. 42/1996 on the training of teachers

Further sources:

1. PISA 2003 - National Report, Slovakia, Pedagogic Institute of the State, Bratislava, 2003
2. PISA 2006 - National Report, Slovakia, Pedagogic Institute of the State, Bratislava, 2003
3. Attila Fodor: School Council (Guide to the establishment of self governing school organizations), Slovakian Hungarian Alliance of Pedagogues, Komárom 2000
4. Attila Fodor: Appointment and dismissal of leaders of institutions of public education (Methodology handout), Comenius Pedagogic Institution, Komárom, 2004
5. Zdeněk Obdržálek: Leader competencies according to the feedbacks of school directors Technológia vzdelávania č. 4/2007
6. Report on the state and standard of education and pedagogic in the schools and school institutions of the Republic of Slovakia in the school year of 2007/2008 Report of the State Supervision of Education, November 2008, Bratislava

