

New Challenges for Head Teachers in Hungarian Schools

Mária Szabó

Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development, Hungary

After a period of twenty years, when shared responsibility and local autonomy characterized Hungarian educational administration, the government decided to improve the quality of education by strengthening the role of the state. Since the end of 2011 several actions have been taken to attain this purpose. This article draws a parallel between the role of head teachers in the decentralized and that of the centralized system of educational administration, and it gives an overview of the activities of the present government of education. It sums up the main elements of the triangle of support, assessment and qualification, focusing on the possible new roles of head teachers in it.

Keywords: head teachers' role, assessment, qualification, and support

Significant changes have taken place in Hungarian education system in the last 3 years. The system of educational administration, which was based on local autonomy and shared responsibility, could not close the gap in the learning outcomes of children. Students, living in big cities in the Western part of the country, with good socio-economic backgrounds produced significantly higher learning achievements than those who live in small villages in Northeast Hungary. The new government decided to bear responsibility for the quality of education by strengthening the role of the state in education. It is now the policy that education is not a market-based delivery but a service, which has to be based on general human values and not on local needs. Actually, in the centralized educational administration system schools have less autonomy and head teachers have less responsibility, but they are declared professional leaders of the schools. This paper overviews the most important elements of the theory of effective 21st century education, summarizes the main elements of the changes of educational administration which mean real challenges for head teachers to become the bridge crossing the gap between theory and practice and it gives a picture about the survey which aimed at gathering information about Hungarian teachers' and head teachers' attitude to the present changes in education.

Some Elements of the Theories on Effective Education in the 21st Century

Schools are the elements of post-modern society that have to reproduce the human capital and ensure well-being of people as well. One of the biggest challenges for the 21st century schools is the realization of efficient personalized education for each student in the system of public education. This means that an effective school has to improve each and every student's learning capabilities and learning performance. Even in the 21st century school the classroom is the most important place of learning and teachers plan and manage the learning activities in it, the quality of teachers has the strongest influence on the learning effectiveness of the students. After the teachers, school leaders have the second strongest impact on the learning achievements of students (Pont, Nusche, and Moorman 2008). They have to create a learning community and improve the innovative learning environment of the school, they have to motivate, support and evaluate teachers.

A relatively autonomous school can learn to deal with the fast changing environment focused on continuous school improvement, which means not only never-ending cycles of planning, doing, controlling and acting, but clear goals of direction for improvement, pressure and support to act for change (Creemers, Peters, and Reynolds 1998). We have to keep in mind that improvement in a complex system of education is not a linear process and it is impossible to predict the results of an intervention. Several interventions even in the three different levels of a system should be carried out and the reaction of the system to them has to be detected and analysed in each case (Fullan 2003).

The Main Characteristics of the Hungarian Educational Administration between 1993 and 2011

The Act of Public Education declared Hungarian schools professionally autonomous institutions in 1993. After then Hungarian schools had a greater level of professional autonomy while the tasks and responsibilities of educational administration were shared among national, regional, local and school levels, and several agencies. The idea that schools and education – especially on the basic level – has to serve local communities was the basis of decentralized educational administration. While local governments had to provide basic education for their citizens, each and every local authority had to maintain kindergartens and basic schools

TABLE 1 The Main Fields of Leader Training Programmes, by the Ministerial Decree

Theme	Ratio within training period
Strategy	25–30%
Education	20–25%
Organization	15–20%
Human factor	15–20%
Economy and law	10–15%

NOTES Adapted from Schratz et al. (2010a).

(in the beginning of the period several general secondary schools were maintained by local authorities, but later they were given to the county authorities, which were responsible for providing secondary education).

The legislation has been regarding school leadership as a teachers' position, which can be held for only a five-year period. But several applications can be made. Head teachers were responsible not only for effectiveness of teaching and learning, but for each element of operating of the organisation, e.g. staff, budget, safety, communication with the partners (local community, the maintainer, parents). While small villages are typical elements of the Hungarian settlement-structure, more than 3000 local government units had to maintain as few as one elementary school. While educational administration was not separated from the local authorities, there was not enough professionalism for educational administration in some small settlements. The huge differences in professionalism, school improvement notion, and the funding possibilities of different types of settlements resulted in great differences not only in the achievements of schools, but even in the physical environment of education and the incomes of teachers.

The Roles and Tasks of School Leaders between 1993 and 2011

In the decentralized educational administration system school heads were responsible almost for everything in their school. The most important tasks of school leaders in that period could derive from the main topics of school leadership training programmes, which were regulated by a ministerial decree. The topics and their ratio in the leadership training programmes are summarized in table 1.

The data show five topics of school leadership. Strategy had the highest ratio in the leadership training. Education was in the

second place; organisation and human factor had the same ratio on the third place ‘economy and law’ was the less important topic in the training of head teachers. It is remarkable that such a characteristic element of a 21st century school leadership as leading and managing change was not present in the topics of official leadership training. The most important fields of educational leadership according to the experts’ opinion were the following: strategic leadership and management (1), instructional leadership and management (2), law, HR management and organisational development (3), administration (4), and the management of changes and aspects of lifelong learning (5) (Schratz et al. 2010a, 84).

Hungary has not had professional standards for head teachers, but some Hungarian experts participated in the Central European Project that aimed at creating a common professional competency framework on school leadership (Schratz et al. 2010a; 2010b; 2013.). In the frame of these international activities a group of Hungarian head teachers, representatives of local and national level of educational administration and experts of leadership training programmes worked together to create a professional profile of a Hungarian head teacher using the RDA (Role Diagrammatic Approach) method in 2010.

An average head teacher is a pragmatic and loyal person and a good organiser. From the deeper analysis of the results some more characteristics of this head teacher can be seen. The completion of tasks is important for him/her, he/she likes to know what he/she can expect from whom, and can operate in an environment where rules are clear. S/he is a good co-operator, task-oriented, who likes stability, safety. Mutual trust is important for her/him. We can say that a typical Hungarian head teacher in 2010, in the decentralized system of educational administration, where schools and head teachers had a great level of professional autonomy, was stronger.

Significant Changes after 2011

Policy makers are not satisfied with the quality of the Hungarian education system. The learning achievements of Hungarian students are under the average in most international assessments and these assessments show the high gaps between schools. The Hungarian education system cannot reduce the students’ socio-cultural differences. Hungarian schools are traditionally very se-

lective, so the gaps are not inside, but between schools. The goal of the government is to improve the quality of education and closing the gap.

A New Act of Public Education was accepted at the end of 2011. On the basis of this regulation, a state centre for maintaining schools ('Klebensberg' Institution Maintenance Centre) and a national network system of educational authorities (school districts) was established and started to operate on 1st January of 2013. So thus most of the schools have been maintained by the state, which has become the employer of all Hungarian teachers and school heads.

There are also changes in the regulation of the curriculum. A revised national core curriculum was launched in the summer of 2012, and by the end of the year the so-called frame curricula came out, which represent the second level of content regulation. These documents were created for each type of schools and subjects by several groups of subject experts. They are based on the national core curriculum. They contain the purpose of teaching and learning of the given subject and its different parts. They prescribe for each topic the 90% of the number of lessons for the whole academic year and they suggest methods of teaching and contain the attained results in two-year periods. Some subjects have two or three parallel framework curricula for the same type of schools. Schools have to select from the framework curricula and then they have control over 10% of the total sum of lessons to add to the framework and create their own local curriculum. As the framework curricula contain only 90% of total sum of lessons, schools can use other 10% of lessons for their own ideas or needs. Schools had to choose from the frame curricula and to create their local curriculum by completing the teaching time and contents.

There are several new elements of legislation concerning the teachers' training and carrier system. From the 2012–2013 academic year there is a compulsory aptitude test for the candidates to teachers' training institutions. The Education Secretariat published the *Training Output Requirements for Teacher Training* in March of 2013 and at the end of August a government decree came up with the operational tasks of introducing the new systems of teachers' evaluation and support. Both of these documents contain the eight professional competencies of teachers; the last one prescribes the method and topics of teachers' qualification and the professional assessment of institutions.

The main idea behind the changes is the fact that teachers have



FIGURE 1
The Triangle of Assessment,
Support, and Evaluation

key role in assuring the quality of education (McKinsey&Company 2007). Several political decisions and actions have taken place to make teacher profession an attractive job and to encourage talented secondary students to choose it. Typical elements of the strategy are the aptitude test and the special scholarship for the students who participate in teacher training. The teachers' qualification/carrier system has great importance not only in making the teaching profession an attractive job, but it also shows a professional perspective for teachers, and abolishes the wage differences among teachers who work in remote and poor settlements. This qualification system is strongly connected to the professional assessment of education, and the professional support for the progress in the professional promotional system. The three elements of support and evaluation can be summarized in the diagram that is shown in figure 1.

The three vertexes of this 'triangle' are the 'qualification' of teachers, the 'professional advisory system' for teachers, and the 'national professional assessment.' The goal of this system is to raise the quality of education by increasing the quality of the teachers' work. The most important element of this system is the newly established promotion system of teachers, which is based

on their system of qualification. Teachers who start their career are employed as full-time workers in a school, but they have fewer lessons than their more experienced colleagues. During this two years long period trained mentors support their professional socialization and their daily professional work. At the end of the second year of teaching, the young teacher has to take a qualification exam. After a successful exam he/she becomes a qualified teacher¹. After six to nine years working in this stage, it is compulsory to apply for a qualification for the second level of the qualified teacher status (teacher 2). Who have reached this level of professional promotion system can stay in this stage till the end of their career, but there are two different branches for those who want to step forward.

The ‘national professional assessment,’ which has to be realized in each five years in each school, is the second element of this new system. The complex process of this professional assessment contains the assessment of each teacher of the school, the assessment of the head teacher, and the assessment of the school as organisation. The third element of this triangle is the ‘professional advisory’ system of teachers. Its main role is to support teachers in their continuous professional development and making progress in their career. This system has two different elements. One of them is a subject-based advisory, which supports teachers’ work with the help of yearly-organised visits of advisors. Advisors are teachers who are prepared to support others. Working in a school, they have living experience on the practice of teachers and one day a week they visit other schools to work with their colleagues. They help teachers to reflect on their professional work, to realize their professional needs and plan the activities of their personal professional improvement. This professional support could achieve its mission and could be effective and sustainable only if the external support is closely connected to the schools’ internal support system, which has to be created and improved by the school heads. To be an instructional leader who supports not only individual teachers, but fosters schools to become a learning organisation should be a real challenge and an important role for the head teachers in this new situation.

On the centre of the triangle we can find ‘professional standards for teachers.’ This is a newly improved document, which contains the eight competences of teachers, declared by a government decree. Each competence has two or three sub-competencies. The document describes the main characteristics of each of the

five stages of professional promotion of teachers. These descriptions show the typical characteristics and important virtues (good characteristics) and tolerable weaknesses of the teachers in the given stage. Typical knowledge, skills, and attitudes are described at each sub competences. This document can inform teachers about the expectations of the topics and the levels of their professional development. It gives background information for subject advisors, who have to support teachers' continuous development in each competence. This is the basis of the teachers' assessment in the frame of the 'institutional professional assessment' and the 'qualification of teachers.' The arrows of the figure show the connections among different elements of the triangle and it is clear that several connections exist. Advisors support teachers using the experiences of assessment, helping teachers to reach a successful qualification, while qualification is based not only on the experiences of their experts, but on the results of assessment, too. An important element of this system will be the teachers' portfolio, which will be used in all of the three activities.

Requirements for Head Teachers after 2011

In the centralized system of the educational administration the less professional autonomy of the schools can be strongly felt in the reduced freedom in creating the school level local curricula. Head teachers do not have a right to select the members of the teaching staff; do not have to deal with budget and the problems of technical staff. Their main and most important duty is instructional leadership. Head teachers should become professional leaders of teaching staff. They have to take part actively in the process of this centrally organised national system of assessment, evaluation, and support. They have to motivate and support their teachers to prepare for the process, to create and use their professional portfolio, and to create a culture of reflection, as the basis of continuous professional learning. The target of the reports, professional plans and feedbacks of the experts of evaluation and assessment and of the advisors is to promote a positive change in the daily professional work of the interested teachers, head teachers and schools. It could happen if only head teachers and leadership of the schools can lead a continuous school improvement process on the basis of the data of these documents. Schools could become learning organisations by enhancing peer learning and mentoring, building a learning culture, evaluating teachers, and using

some other methods. Some head teachers know these techniques, but each of them has to learn to build this work into the results of the new system of evaluation, assessment and support.

Unfortunately there is no professional standard for head teachers in Hungary. In the actual situation the areas of the newly introducing assessment system of head teachers could give information on the tasks and expectations of them. As mentioned earlier, the system of institutional assessment contains three main areas: the assessment of teachers, head teachers, and schools. It is going to take place in every five years. The planned areas of head teachers are the so called 'Central 5,' which were improved in the framework of the International Co-operation for School Leadership involving Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden (Schratz et al. 2013).

The 'Central 5' are the main elements of leadership tasks, and each of them is interpreted by the competence elements of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Only the main topics, without the detailed competence descriptions of 'Central 5' are involved in the new system of assessment of head teachers. In the planned assessment system some elements of the head teachers' activities are connected to each topic. There are good examples when an output regulation influenced the earlier process positively. So the defined elements of the assessment of Hungarian head teachers are the following: (1) 'Leading and Managing Teaching and Learning,' (2) 'Leading and Managing Change,' (3) 'Leading and Managing Self' (4) 'Leading and Managing Others' (5) 'Leading and Managing the Institution' and this approach could improve the process of professionalization of head teachers' work in Hungary.

The Voice of Head Teachers

In the framework of the improvement of the new system of assessment, evaluation and support, a survey on experiences of the earlier advisory system and expectations for the renewed system of assessment and support of different professional actors of education system was carried out the beginning of 2013. All of the Hungarian head teachers were invited to take part in this survey by fulfilling an online questionnaire. 553 persons (about 10% of the total sum of active head teachers) filled in the questionnaire. Their experiences on professional advisory mostly connects to the realization of National School Improvement Programmes, in which the 53% of the represented schools participated (the coun-

TABLE 2 The Support Needs of Head Teachers (%)

Type of support	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Advisory support	39.1	28.4	23	9.2
Training	27.3	38.9	27.7	6.0
Information	77.8	12.7	9.4	0.2
Professional forums	77.8	12.7	9.4	0.2
Professional organisations	32.9	34.2	29.8	2.9
Evaluation	19.5	40.9	34.9	4.3
Help desk service	23.1	30.0	28.8	13.0

NOTES Column headings are as follows: (1) yes, immediately, (2) yes, in a near future, (3) yes, in a future, (4) no.

try level average is less than 20%). The questionnaire investigated the support needs of head teachers. The respondents were expected to estimate the urgency of their professional support needs, choosing from seven different types of professional support: 'advisory support,' 'training,' 'information,' 'professional forums,' 'professional organisations,' 'evaluation' of their work and 'helpdesk service.' They were able to choose from four categories of urgency: 'immediately,' 'in the near future,' 'in the future' and 'never.' The composition of the answers is shown in table 2.

It is obvious that in the time of data collection the head teachers' biggest problem was the lack of information. The strongest (almost 80%) need of the respondents were the urgent need of information and the professional forums, where the information can be collected. Looking at the near future needs of the respondents, a limited balance of needs can be identified in the needs of evaluation and training (about 40%). The need of professional organisations, which can be the forums of peer learning, is on the third place of head teachers' needs of professional support. In the fourth place we can find a helpdesk service, which is a typical self-activity to get urgent operational help, and the need for advisory support is only in the fifth place from the seven possibilities. On the basis of these results, we can say that evaluation means more for Hungarian head teachers in their professional development than support. It is in strong correlation with the government activities, summarized above. Actually realization of a support system for head teachers is not planned, but their assessment in the frame of institutional professional assessment in each five years; in the second or third year of their five-year period of employment.

While in the new, centralized system of educational administration the head teachers' most important role should be the instruc-

TABLE 3 Head Teachers' Opinion About a Good Teacher (%)

Category	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Subject knowledge	71.0	25.0	3.0	0.4
Methodological variegation	72.0	24.0	2.0	0.2
Supporting each student learning abilities	38.0	42.0	14.0	3.0
Support of peer learning	25.0	54.0	17.0	2.9
Creating an adaptive learning environment	35.0	49.0	12.0	1.2
Effective communication	66.0	28.0	4.0	0.6
Co-operation with parents	45.0	41.0	10.0	1.8
Co-operation with different partners of the school	21.0	48.0	21.0	8.0
Teacher cooperation	62.0	35.0	3.0	0.0
Assessment of students	45.3	45.2	6.3	0.7
Experience based learning	44.8	45.0	7.7	0.9
Peer mentoring	38.3	47.7	11.6	0.5
Enquiry	13.5	40.3	32.7	10.1
Creating and operating professional teams	25.6	40.0	23.8	4.2
Leadership	28.3	45.7	19.5	3.4
Self-knowledge and self-development	56.2	33.9	7.4	0.9

NOTES Column headings are as follows: (1) very important, (2) important, (3) not so important, (4) not important.

tional management, the survey aimed to collect data on the head teachers' idea of a good teacher. The results of this question can be seen in table 3.

The respondents had to give their opinion on the most important characteristics of a good teacher in a 21st century school. The four judgements for each characteristic were 'very important,' 'important,' 'not so important,' and 'not important.' Some of the characteristics came from the professional standards for teachers and some from the international examples. Looking at the results, for to five main characteristics of a good teacher can be detected. The highest scores (more than 70% of 'very important' answers) were given to the subject knowledge and methodological variety. In the third and fourth place (66% and 61% of 'very important' answers) are the effective communication and teacher co-operation. On the fifth place, a bit less than 60% of 'very important' respondents are self-knowledge and self-development. At the last places of the rankings of the respondents there are such important characteristics of a 21st century teacher as leadership (28% of 'very important,' but 46% 'important' answers), creating and operating professional teams (25,6% of 'very important,' but 40% of 'important' answers) support of peer learning (25% of 'very important,'

but with the 54% of 'important' answers), and the absolute last is enquiry (13,5% of 'very important,' but 40% of 'important' answers, and highest score in the 'not so important' category).

Summarizing the results of the survey, we can say that head teachers' view on teachers' job is based on the traditional view of teacher' job, but there are some elements of the modern ideas, too.

The most important requirements formulated by school leaders for a good teacher are 'subject knowledge' and 'methodological diversity.' 'Effective communication,' which is the third in the ranking of importance, could indicate either a traditional or a modern view of the role of teachers, as we are not in the position to know what the respondents understood by 'effective communication.' Namely, in this summary statement can be included both the ability to lecture professionally (a characteristic of the traditional role of teachers) and a modern image of a teacher, who can strike the right tone with various partners (parents, colleagues, and pupils). Besides the great importance of the 'cooperation with teachers' the ranking of 'working together in professional teams' at a lower level may indicate that the respondents attribute a great importance principally to the harmonization of the knowledge and requirements of the school subjects, and that they attached less importance to the focusing of the learning requirements of each pupil. This supposition can be confirmed also by the fact that among the less important elements we can find the improvement of the learning abilities of each student and the development of the adaptive learning environment. It is encouraging that among the most important characteristics we can see self-knowledge, but it needs further reflexion that the respondents do not attach importance to the leadership capabilities of the teachers. In connection with the implementation of the new assessment, evaluation and support system, the results draw our attention to the question how remarkably important it is to reflect collectively at institutional and national levels about the role of teachers. They also promote the collective interpretation of professional requirements, which are formulated also in provisions of law.

Summary

The Hungarian system of education has been passing through significant changes to improve the learning outcomes of children. The most typical characteristic of these changes is the

centralization of educational administration. In this new situation schools, teachers and school heads have less professional autonomy than they had in the previous 20 years. But this new situation provides some new possibility for better professional work. The head teachers of the schools are not expected to employ teachers now and they do not have to manage the finances of the school, nor the technical duties of the schools. They can become really responsible for the professional leadership and management of the schools but there is a danger that they will perform only the administrative duties.

It is important that to attain the purpose of raising quality of education, educational government of Hungary has taken several interventions in the education system. The first interventions have been place on national level and concerned different elements of the system of education. The newly improving system of the national professional assessment of institutions, that of teachers' support, and that of qualification are expected to reach the classroom level in the near future. Hopefully, this system is a good tool to make classroom level management more effective for each student.

Legislation in itself is not a proper and sufficient tool to create the professional environment that is necessary to change the classroom-level activities. Continuous professional dialogue in each level of the system of education can indeed result in building a well-operating professional environment. Head teachers should play an important part in the realization of this influence by becoming professional leaders of the teachers.

Actually, as the process is only at the very beginning, there are no data available on its real influence. Being conscious of typical characteristics of complex systems, where the development is not linear and the impacts of the interventions cannot be predicted, educational government and researchers have the responsibility to investigate and analyse the impacts of these interventions and plan new interventions on the basis of data.

References

- Creemers, B., T. Peters, and D. Reynolds, eds. 1989. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger.
- Fullan, M. 2003. *Change Forces with a Vengeance*. London: Falmer.
- McKinsey&Company. 2007. 'How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top.' http://mckinseysociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/Worlds_School_Systems_Final.pdf

- Pont, B., D. Nusche, and H. Moorman. 2008. *Improving School Leadership*. Paris: OECD.
- Schratz, M., M. Hartmann, E. Křížková, A. G. Kirkham, E. Keclíková, T. Baráth, M. Szabó, E. Abari-Ibolya, A. Hašková, A., V. Laššák, J. Erčulj, and P. Peček. 2010b. *Improving School Leadership in Central Europe: Final Report of the Project School Leadership for Effective Learning Involving the Countries of Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia 2010*. Budapest: Tempus Public Foundation.
- Schratz, M., A. Laiminger, F. MacKay, E. Křížková, A. G., Kirkham, T. Baráth, G. Cseh, T. Kígyós, M. Chrappán, E. Kovács, N. Révai, A. Hašková, V. Laššák, M. Bitterová, J. Erčulj, P. Peček, K. Malmberg, and T. Söderberg. 2013. *The Art and Science of Leading a School: A Central European View on Competencies for School Leaders: Final Report of the Project International Co-Operation for School Leadership Involving Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Sweden 2013*. Budapest: Tempus Public Foundation.
- Schratz, M., L. Sláviková, E. Křížková, E. Keclíková, M. Szabó, E. Révész, V. Laššák, A. Hašková, J. Erčulj, P. Peček, and G. Halász. 2010a. *The Role of School Leadership in the Improvement of Learning Country Reports and Case Studies of a Central-European Project 2009*. Budapest: Tempus Public Foundation.