Increased Autonomy of Teachers and Schools in Reformed Secondary VET Programmes

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1. INTRODUCTION

The paper sets out the way we entered into the process of autonomy transfer from the national to school and teacher levels and consequently to student level by changing educational programmes at national and school levels and by developing new relations between participating partners.

The key objectives of the reform of vocational education and training (hereinafter referred to as “VET reform”) were based on the Platform for Setting up Educational Programmes in Lower and Secondary Vocational and Secondary Technical Education whose last version dates back to 2001 (hereinafter referred to as the “Platform”). The document served as the synthesis of preliminary activities which started within the Phare Mocca project as early as the second half of the 90-ies. VET reform was incorporated into a wide-ranging European reform and provides an answer to new social circumstances and the need for VET to quickly respond to economic, technological and social changes to include the use of state-of-the-art information technology in professional, personal and social life, new forms of work organisation, economic and cultural globalization, multiculturalism and challenges posed by sustainable development. Development of participating partners (institutions and individuals) towards assuming professional autonomy and responsibility for high-quality and competent performance of their work also represents one of the key conditions for achieving the objectives set out in the Platform.

With establishing flexibility at the national level and opening up the room for schools and teachers to take important decisions and to have the chance to influence school policy, there was a need for new implementation concepts at the school level and for new expert documents, guidelines and support for schools enabling them to better cope with the existing situation.

The document named school curriculum represents the biggest innovation and is an expression of the autonomy in secondary vocational and technical schools. The school curriculum is a process and development document of the school formulated on the basis of the national curriculum (with foundations laid in the Platform). It consists of two basic elements, i.e. teaching and didactic concept of the school and annual preparations of educational process prepared by a team of the school teaching staff by bearing in mind the local environment and needs of employers for which the students are trained.

2. PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY AND AUTONOMY OF SLOVENE TEACHERS

Kuščer (according to Marentič P. et al., 2005) presents the following definition: Teacher autonomy is a free and independent choice of the concept of learning and teaching, selection of methods, techniques and forms of work. Learning and objective oriented planning also enables teachers to choose contents.
Medveš (same source) also regards professional school autonomy and consequently teacher autonomy first and foremost as the process, whereby input conditions – (learning plans and knowledge catalogues) and expected results – (defined in national knowledge standards and final secondary school test results) are set externally and centrally.

Dal (same source) makes a distinction between a weak and strong conception of teacher autonomy. The weak form provides the teacher with freedom to use well established professional knowledge when implementing learning plans which were determined elsewhere. The strong form does not merely enable teachers to decide on methods and forms of work as experts in their field, but also to take decision on contents, working conditions and measures of school policy.

The boundaries determining teacher autonomy are set both internally and externally. Internal boundaries primarily touch upon the level of teacher responsibility and professional competence, while external boundaries are represented by laws, rules and exercising of control over teachers (same source).

Niemi (same source) differentiates between limited and extended professionalism of teachers. The distinction is based on the perception of professional autonomy. Extended professionalism has the following features:

- professional interest in the teacher’s own growth and growth of pupils founded on open communication and reflection;
- professional autonomy based on the teacher’s competence and sense of responsibility;
- dynamic perception of learning by learners and teachers themselves;
- cooperation and interaction in the school and outside the school premises.

Moreover, Marentič et al. (same source) state that the teachers who were the subjects of their research were provided with the weak conception of autonomy. Marentič et al. conducted an evaluation study whose main purpose was to determine to what extent Slovene teachers feel more autonomous in their decision-making, more professionally competent, professionally responsible and successful within a reformed school. The survey included primary school teachers and secondary school teachers in a grammar school programme.

The authors came to the conclusion that there is a diverse conception of professional autonomy between Slovene teachers, ranging from non-differentiated and schematic to highly differentiated when teachers are fully aware of certain constraints and frameworks, and also including the perception whereby autonomy is linked to responsibility, competence, teachers’ own further education and teamwork. 22 % of primary school and grammar school teachers define autonomy in vague terms (to be autonomous is to be self-supporting and independent); 23 % of respondents hereby emphasize a possibility to freely choose learning contents, methods or both; 24 % of them are at the same time conscious of certain constraints (especially external ones). The perception of a higher level of autonomy when teachers connect autonomy with responsibility and competence was found in 31 % of teachers, out of which 27 % of respondents link autonomy even more precisely with consideration of learners, parents, responsible setting of learning objectives, teamwork, personal growth, continuous further training etc. The authors conclude that only one in four Slovene primary school and grammar school teachers has the conception of professional autonomy that comes close to “extended professionalism” or “strong conception of autonomy” needed for fulfilment of more demanding objectives or for capturing reform “spirit”, whereby class teachers feel most prepared and autonomous in their professional decisions. A prevailing trend of weak
autonomy was registered in the survey and it is predominantly limited to activities in the classroom and to responsible implementation of learning plans by taking into account given framework conditions.

No such empirical research on the level of autonomy and responsibility exists for vocational and technical school teachers. We can perhaps formulate a hypothesis and draw a conclusion that there would have been similarities due to the same cultural and historical background. We still think, however, that the perception of autonomy and understanding of one’s own role with teachers participating in the reform of vocational and technical schools would benefit from additional empirical research due to certain specific features characterising the launch of reform change and due to the fact that secondary vocational and technical schools are more exposed to market forces in the light of a decreased matriculation percentages. On the other hand, these schools had already suffered due to deficient professional support and smaller opportunities to select appropriate staff in the light of a smaller number of teacher experts whose career would focus on research, development and applied work in VET.

We are of the view that teachers in VET reform, primarily in the pilot phase, were afforded a possibility to develop a strong conception of autonomy which perhaps in the past was not always exploited to the extent it could have been as the teachers have traditionally not been accustomed to it. Consequently, teachers today participate in the setting up of educational programmes and knowledge catalogues; cooperate in working groups laying down the professional platform for putting in force documents at the national level and in groups putting forward standards for school equipment and premises in order to implement the programme. When new programmes are being introduced in the form of a test (pilot implementation), schools also have a role in shaping school policies.

3. FROM PLAN TO IMPLEMENTATION

3.1. Basic documents behind VET reform

The basic guiding document on VET reform is the reformed Platform for Setting up Educational Programmes in Lower and Secondary Vocational and Technical Education developed in 2001 (hereinafter referred to as: the “Platform”). By laying down strategic guidelines and new paradigms, the document endeavours to find answers to variable social circumstances in Slovenia and Europe which call for a swift response from vocational and technical education. These circumstances are characterised by rapid economic, technological and social changes; use of the information technology in professional, personal and social life; new forms of organisation, economic and cultural globalization on the one hand and multiculturalism on the other hand; environmental challenges; development of innovation as the main strategic edge when competing at the global market and lifelong learning which has become synonymous with employment.

The direction was also dictated by the fundamental European documents, such as common European objectives for European education and training systems, the Copenhagen Declaration and the Maastricht Communiqué.

When drafting the first educational programme Car Mechatronic, authors followed the basic guidelines and objectives for establishing educational programmes highlighted in the Platform (2001, p. 6-15):
- bringing together general, technical and practical knowledge into a coherent and problem structured educational programme, knowledge catalogues and examination catalogues. The ultimate objective was to achieve greater internal substantive intertwining of knowledge and to develop professional and key competencies giving rise to comprehensive competence for profession, participation in society, personal development and further education;
- striking the balance between content planning, objective oriented planning and problem oriented planning when preparing knowledge catalogues and conducting learning process;
- developing modularly structured and flexible educational programme;
- opening up curriculum and influencing local partners to meet local needs and interests;
- determining a uniform educational standard for school and dual education;
- achieving greater programme flexibility and school autonomy by devising the framework educational programme at the national level and transferring a part of decision-making process and curriculum design at the school level (syllabus with allocation of periods, open curriculum, implementation models);
- encouraging schools to develop new methodical and didactic solutions, increasing individualization of teaching and reinforcing teamwork of all teachers involved.

(First report …, 2005, p. 9-10)

3.2. Organisation in introduction of new programmes

Both introduction and implementation of new educational programmes in secondary VET took the form of a pilot project and an experiment so as to create opportunities for constant reflection and solution of problems directly in the teaching practice.

Representatives of all social partners have been involved in providing scientific basis and guidelines for implementing new programmes according to the Platform. The project group set up by the working group representing all stakeholders has been in charge of introducing the new programmes. The stakeholders involved are as follows: representatives of various social partners, i.e. the Ministry of Education and Sport and its two institutes – the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training, and the National Education Institute, the representatives of the Chamber of Crafts and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The aim of this diverse composition was to represent employer’s interests and needs in vocational and technical education as well as those of teachers and head teachers of pilot schools to provide them with equal opportunities to devise scientific basis needed for implementing and influencing education policy.

Working groups have been responsible for devising scientific basis in terms of planning the school curriculum, practical education of students in the working process, assessment and marking, training teachers to carry out new programmes and suggesting immediate improvements to the existing practice. In addition, taking into consideration the new needs from the field, the working group has for its pilot implementation of secondary VET set up a number of working groups to address the following aspects: drawing up learning materials and changing normative basis (such as the number of students in the classroom). The working groups are responsible for providing the project group with solutions, drawing up professional materials and guidelines and introducing into schools any changes confirmed by the project group.
It is schools, where programmes are introduced and implemented, which are responsible for introducing new programmes, i.e. under the wing of head teachers. The National Institute for Vocational Education and Training and the National Education Institute help them in their efforts to tackle any development related problems by providing them with counselling and training.

3.3. Teacher training and counselling

Teacher training and counselling has been designed according to these principles:
- Each teacher programme assembly (a group of all teachers carrying out educational programmes at any school) represents a whole, and when it comes to implementing an educational programme and related professional issues, all teachers need to be involved and they have to function as a team. Significant training and counselling should be focused on whole teams of teachers.
- Each teacher programme assembly should continuously monitor new educational programmes in their first implementation stage (3-4 years).
- Providing an exchange of examples of good practice and putting in place mechanisms for reflection and professional debate among teacher programme assemblies – i.e. groups of teachers carrying out the same or different new educational programmes at various schools).
- Supporting heads or core working teams (head teachers, operational leaders and some teachers) in charge of introducing and implementing new educational programmes at schools in their management efforts as well as establishing mechanisms for discussion and reflection.
- Supporting teachers in their discussions, monitoring teachers and providing them with professional support when it comes to representing their professional field in the new educational programme by providing them with a similar role in various teacher programme assemblies (implementing the same new programme at various schools and implementing another new programme at the same or different schools).
- Organising mechanisms intended for introducing new programmes in such a way that the initiative and the definition of needs for professional development originates with teacher programme assemblies, their management team and individual teachers.
- Adjusting training to any findings made during monitoring which have been acquired through empirical research and interpreted according to existing scientific theories.

When working together with education personnel, we, to set an example, reward and promote the development of the following values and behaviour practices: self-initiative, autonomy and reliability, proactivity, trust, innovativeness, creativity, association, teamwork, networking and setting common objectives, flexible mindset and action; focus on students, parents and employers; analysis of one’s own practice and motivation for one’s own professional and personal development; democratic management style based on professional arguments, flexibility in playing various roles in teamwork etc.

An effort has been made to bring home to each team of teachers that, when planning and carrying out their education related work, they need to take into account their immersion into the wider social environment, and considering national education policies, but above all, the requirements of students, market, employers, local environment and wider society. They are encouraged to, when taking and providing arguments for their professional decisions, take into account their colleagues’ and management’s opinion as well as recommendations of supporting institutions, such as the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training,
the National Education Institute, various faculties, chambers of crafts, chambers of commerce and industry, ministries….

When working with teachers our aim is to develop the set of following 7 competencies:
- ability for cooperation, interaction and teamwork
- ability to pursue project and development work
- ability to pursue lifelong learning
- developing appropriate learning environment for individuals and groups
- ICT literacy
- ability to manage school administration
- positive attitude towards development and progress and consideration for one’s own personal well being and personal development.

4. OPENLY STRUCTURED NATIONAL DOCUMENTS – STIMULATION FOR DEVELOPING SCHOOL AUTONOMY

National documents, such as educational programmes for individual occupations, knowledge catalogues and rules on assessment and marking, have gained on flexibility and open structure in the reform process. The process of opening up, loosening and transforming of a considerable percentage of regulations at the national level into expert recommendations is still taking place in gradual steps in order to transfer a part of decision-making to school and teacher levels. The key decisions transferred from the national to school level in the programme and knowledge catalogues were as follows:
- defining a syllabus through allocation of periods;
- open curriculum (school has a possibility to completely independently plan its learning process up to 20 % so that it can be adapted to the needs of the local environment and employers);
- implementation models (only recommendations at the national level).

In the light of growing flexibility and openness of national documents, there was a need for noting down adopted decisions and putting forward implementation concepts at school level. The document called School Curriculum was therefore created.

5. PLANNING AT SCHOOL LEVEL: SCHOOL CURRICULUM DOCUMENT – SCHOOL AUTONOMY MADE CONCRETE

The school curriculum is a process and development document of the school. Consequently, its external boundaries are represented by legislation and the national educational programme, while expert judgement is the only internally limiting factor. The school curriculum should be seen as the planning level coming between the superior national level and subordinate level, i.e. teacher level. The school curriculum covers all features which could come to the common denominator of global preparation of education and schooling process, and it consists of two basic elements:
- pedagogical and didactic concept of the school which is made concrete in
- annual preparations of the educational process.

The planning of the school curriculum is new to Slovene schools. When compared to traditional annual work planning which teachers had been accustomed so far, there is also one distinction pertaining to the extent of interference with the work of individual teachers. During common annual preparation, teachers not only have to agree on time coordination in cases of some related topics, but are also obliged to talk about how to reach common
objectives. These are the objectives which are to be met through integration of fields due to competence based programmes.

In addition to common annual preparations of educational process, key components of the document School Curriculum designed by the whole team of teachers in a specific educational programme at school also include: open curriculum, school development strategy, assessment plan and the system of simultaneous self-evaluation or quality assurance process. The open curriculum deserves special mention whereby the school is completely free to adopt its decision about the planning of learning process in 20 % share of the school curriculum. This section makes it possible for the school to maximally adapt to the needs of employers and regional environment for which students are trained.

(Curriculum …, 2006).

6. RESULTS AND EFFECTS OF REFORM AFTER 1st YEAR – POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT CHANGES

The monitoring of the first year in the introduction of the pilot educational programme Car Mechatronic unveiled the first development benefits and exposed a number of barriers, unknowns and uncertainties between participants. The barriers have remained one of the priorities in our further efforts.

All pilot schools succeeded in taking the following significant professional and organisational steps (Report…, 2005):
- formulating the school curriculum and creating a possibility to engage in constant reflection of achievements, amending and shaping the curriculum in terms of the process;
- promoting intersubject integration, planning and implementation of teaching. This process will require systematic and long-term expert development;
- initiating project work method in the form of project weeks;
- opening up to the environment and reinforcing connections with the local environment and social partners.

Teamwork was needed in order for teachers and schools to meet the objectives set, and this is one of the main benefits brought about by the new organization of school work. A majority of teachers perceive added value of the new programme in team approach strengthening integration and intersubject links, more flexible programme and practicability of knowledge. However, a rational evaluation of school curricula revealed that applicability of knowledge is understood in the sense of an instrumental skill and not in the meaning of our initial definition of competence assuming intertwining of theoretical knowledge structured in one’s own conceptual networks; skills; methodological competencies as well as personal and social dimensions (developing responsibility and autonomy in students; social skills; resourcefulness and innovativeness, learning to learn etc.). It could also be added that we have not yet been able to reach the level of problem based planning of teaching with schools as we mainly tackled occupational routine, but did not sufficiently incorporate key competencies (entrepreneurship, learning to learn, social skills etc.).

The National Institute for Vocational Education and Training monitors implementation. The results testify to the fact that there are more cases of integration between general and technical contents as well as between theory and practical training (some teachers referred to occasional cooperation of general subject teachers at practical training in the workshop). Apart from
team planning, we could also observe models of team teaching; teachers are more familiar with objectives and contents of their colleagues; there are increased numbers of more active and student-centred approaches. Teachers also perceived more freedom in planning of objectives and contents as national knowledge catalogues provide for objectives which need to be achieved, but do not indicate when; teachers are free to plan specific contents for meeting the objectives.

Head teachers report in interviews about their endeavours to establish democratic climate and open communication, and stress that open communication made an essential contribution to motivation of teachers for initiating changes. Open communication rewarded efforts and successful solutions of individual teachers in new problem situations whereby good practice examples were highlighted and offered as shining examples.

7. WHAT ABOUT IMPLEMENTATION PROBLEMS?

In order for the reform objectives to be met, fundamental changes in implementation and organization models are required for implementation at the school level. It is foreseen that teachers organize their work in the way which reinforces their cooperation in the planning phase and teaching implementation as much as possible. Teaching should be more conducive to activity, student centred and problem based. The learning environment should come close to working and life situations. In other words, teachers need space and time to meet in order to engage into team planning, reflection, monitoring and evaluation of learning process, while organization of space and time for implementation of the learning process calls for change as well. Old organisational forms, when one person at school outlined the organizational plan for space and time of all stakeholders in the learning process for the whole year, do not support the fulfilment of reform guidelines. Organization of space and time for implementation needs to submit to the plan of the school curriculum and cannot be set for a year in advance. If the learning process is to be brought into line with needs, speed and students’ progress, organization of space and time for teaching should be flexible enough so that it could be changed and adapted to some extent throughout the year. We should also mention the fact that all teachers participating in programmes proceeding according to the new Platform are at the same time also involved in programmes running in line with the traditional Platform. Therefore, one can safely assume that schools are confronted with an extremely complex situation in terms of organization, and are left to their own resourcefulness and experience. These statements have also been corroborated by monitoring. The next section summarizes key problems and submits possible solutions:

- Meetings of teacher programme assembly: Teachers are to meet at least once a week for planning, evaluation and monitoring of the learning process, but they state to have problems in reconciling time to meet for this purpose. Perhaps the problem could be partly resolved if the teacher’s work is completely transferred to school (40-hour working week). In this way, teachers would have fewer difficulties in finding time for teamwork. On the other hand, all schools would have to allocate teachers space and computer equipment also for individual work which has so far been mostly done from home, such as: study of literature; finding information on the Internet; communication with employers; preparing materials, learning sheets, authentic tasks, guidelines, didactic tools for student activities; in-depth planning of their professional work with students; preparing feedback for students (including evaluation); development work for school and profession etc.
- Formulating flexible timetables: Teachers warned in particular about their frustration stemming from the fact that they cannot realize innovative ideas stimulated by the reform. The basic questions in this context are how to formulate a flexible timetable of the new or old programmes and reconcile rigid timetables in old programmes or how to reallocate human resources so that they would teach in a smaller number of programmes, but with a bigger share in these programmes (e.g. one teacher could teach both professional theory as well as practical training). This question calls for systematic and prudent problem solving in a transitional period, also when recruiting and planning human resources.

- Development work at school: Teachers report that they are fully engaged with teaching lessons; hence they do not have enough time for development work. The solution would probably be to additionally employ different educational staff – educationalists, psychologists, special educators, as well as part-time employment of employers, other practitioners and researchers to be involved in different development projects, especially when schools could bid for the ESF funds. It would be sensible to use these funds for projects aimed at different training of occupational teachers at posts in companies and lighten their load stemming from teaching obligations so that they would be able to participate more in development projects for school and their own professional field. Some schools, above all big centres, have already carried out some of the aforementioned projects with support from other funds (e.g. Phare etc.).

- Material conditions: Schools were provided with national funds for equipment, and school representatives were involved in decisions on the selection of equipment in given possibilities. Despite these facts, teachers in monitoring responded that they did not feel adequate support in this field etc.

- Lack of learning materials: New concepts of teaching also create the need for new learning materials and new learning aids. The ESF funds were available for new learning materials, both for expert support in preparation of materials and for creation of learning materials. The creation of learning materials for students and teacher manuals on the interdisciplinary basis has so far proved to be too demanding for teachers. Individual fragments came into existence, but not a whole work which would support a three-year learning process. We assume that interdisciplinary materials could be designed as the result of experience and knowledge acquired in interdisciplinary team planning and implementation of the learning process.

- Norms: The system level calls for adoption of a decision on a smaller number of students in a class inspired by foreign examples. We think that too big classes (also 34 students per class) represent the main barrier standing in the way of adaptation of learning paths enabling quicker progress of every student. Teachers have been constantly calling attention to this fact. An optimal number which would strike a compromise between necessary conditions for high-quality learning process on the one hand and cost-effective use of funds on the other hand, would be 20 students in the class and not more than 25.

- Teacher programmes assemblies also quote deficient competence for developing new didactic models and for new planning methods, work organization and cooperation, as well as lack of information and deficient adoption of reform philosophy. New objectives undoubtedly bring about more unpredictable and complex new situations
8. WHAT ARE OBJECTIVE BARRIERS STANDING IN THE WAY OF GREATER AUTONOMOUS ROLE?

As we wanted to stimulate autonomy of schools and teachers, we simultaneously also raised the level of complexity and responsibility of the teacher’s role. Teachers have been put to the test and the bar keeps rising as teachers are obliged to pass an increased number of decisions also in the areas they did not tackle in the past. Traditionally, many teachers have not been used to active involvement in public decision-making, preparation of expert solutions for implementation of new programmes, draft of rules on assessment and marking as well as other rules and regulations stipulating their working conditions. They are confronted with new pressures, such as asserting market mechanisms in the changed system of school funding (Mofas system). The Mofas system is based on allocation of funds to schools per individual student, and no longer per individual employed member of the teaching staff. In parallel to accompanying decreased matriculation percentages for vocational and technical schools, this funding concept has put some schools under enormous pressure. Many schools fear for their long-term existence. From one year to the next, they are occupied with market activities in order to attract students to enrol to their school. Thus, schools have to launch anew a number of activities they did not have to deal with in the past. They often seek additional sponsors for equipment to create a close approximation of the learning environment with the working situation and to implement programmes. Favourable consideration and interest of employers to cooperate in order to help students on their path of personal development and to support teachers in renewal of their professional knowledge often comes in short supply.

Students are also getting more diverse (decreased matriculation percentages also mark the arrival of the population of children who were less successful in primary school) and uncontrollable (increased violence, addiction) (Marentič, 2000), which teachers regard as a big barrier to their educational work.

9. HOW TO PROCEED?

The National Institute for Vocational Education and Training set itself a task to endorse autonomy growth of teachers at the school level in the process of counselling work and teacher education through its development and expert work.

Growing autonomy of schools, head teachers, teachers and students also increases the complexity of problem situations confronting all stakeholders, which requires continuous support of lifelong learning and professional development of participating individuals as well as entire teams.

The supporting institutions, such as the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training, are also faced with increasingly complex tasks. Hence, the content of their work will have to be transformed to include more research and development, counselling and education, which call for academic competence and operational level with simultaneous intertwinment of managerial abilities. There is a growing possibility for national institutions to be innovative...
and offer services, whereby there is greater sensitivity to the needs of students, teachers and schools.

The complexity of training serving the needs of the teacher’s professional development should be enhanced to promote the development of an individual as the thinking practitioner. In other words, training of teachers should be comprehensive and modular, with the emphasis on individual study, integration of acquired experience with group discussions, and not anymore on lectures and workshops.

CONCLUSION:

The empirical data from monitoring indicate that the introduction of new programmes brings about positive development changes in planning and implementation of learning process, however, new barriers also emerge and these need to be tackled prudently. It is essential to persevere at this path. Good cooperation of all partners (pilot schools, public institutions, the Ministry of Education and Sport) and mechanisms set for teamwork within schools and national supporting institutions established in a pilot model, lays good foundations for upgrading implementation solutions and resolving indicated barriers.

(edited in line with the Report…, 2005)

Sources and literature


