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Education officials between hierarchies and networks

EDUCATION OFFICIALS BETWEEN HIERARCHIES AND NETWORKS

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Abstract

The steering of educational institutions in developed countries has changed radically during the past several decades. One of the most crucial changes has been the move from centralized rational planning to more decentralized governance with a diverse set of actors and networks. Education decision-makers (politicians and officials) must be able to steer through a very complex and fluid environment and use different forms of governing tools beyond the traditional command and control. However, the core education steering institutions— education ministries—are still governed in strictly hierarchical ways. This leads to a clash of cultures: officials must be able to operate in networks while they are themselves deeply embedded within a hierarchical organization. This may lead to role confusion. We argue that people who are more engaged in communication are more inclined to a mission orientation. Open communication also increases the level of trust among actors. However, officials who are engaged in communication networks are also less willing to accept the instructions of their superiors if these seem contrary to the utmost goal of education. It is also argued that officials should be trained in new kinds of skills, including critical thinking and social skills.

Keywords

Governance, decentralization, hierarchy, trust, control, education ministries

Introduction

The steering of educational institutions in developed countries has changed radically during the past several decades (Burns & Köster, 2016). One of the most visible aspects of this change is that central governments have lost much of their power to control and directly influence what happens in schools. Where once we had central government, we now have governance which can be defined as "the processes of establishing priorities, formulating and implementing policies and being accountable in complex networks with many different actors" (Theissens, 2016, p. 56).

Despite the shift towards network governance, education ministries still operate as traditional hierarchical bureaucracies. Through organization based on the subordination principle, the ministries ensure that public officials ultimately fall under the minister, who is in turn accountable to elected representatives in parliament. The ministries also ensure predictable and uniform decision making based upon procedural correctness. Yet at the same time, they rule out flexibility in decision making and communication with education actors, which leads to a culture where complying with rules is more important than personal initiative and attaining the utmost goal of improving education.

Arguably, the tension between control and trust—the topic of this special issue—cannot be better observed elsewhere than in education ministries. In most countries, education ministries are organizations where the two major governing principles—vertical (hierarchical) and horizontal—clash. Central-level education officials are increasingly forced to operate in education networks for which flexibility, cooperation, and trust are indispensable. At the same time, however, they are themselves deeply embedded within a hierarchical organization based upon the command-and-control principle.

Very little is known about the people working in education ministries and how they cope with the clash of governing principles they experience. The aim of this article is to fill the gap at least partly, examine the environment in which central-level education officials work, and discuss the consequences for effective education governance. The article is structured as follows. First, I describe the changing education governance. I argue that the steering of education institutions is not possible without new modes of governance such as coordination, communication, and interaction within diverse education networks. This requires, among other things, new types of skills and a high level of trust. Second, I discuss the role of central-level education institutions: ministries. I argue that they must—to a certain degree—be hierarchical organizations, but the hierarchical principle must be accompanied by an organizational culture that is more mission-oriented and flexible. Third,

I analyze the roles and dilemmas of central-level education officials. To illustrate my argument, I use data on the Czech Republic's ministry officials. I conclude with implications for preparing education officials.

From government to governance

A number of observers have noted that current education systems are increasingly difficult to manage. Not only education scholars, but also policy makers, teachers, and citizens have realized that central-level educational goals are often very difficult to attain despite immense investment and radical reforms. The increasing inability of the center to influence education processes and outcomes is caused by many factors outside the education sector, including globalization, the increasing role of new information and communication technologies, demographic and culture changes, and a general shift from government of a unitary state to governance in and by networks (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003). In a network society, the government has lost much of its control over who knows what and when (Savoie, 2003) and, as a consequence, the state is now dependent upon a vast array of state as well as non-state policy actors (Marinetto, 2003). Or as Massé (1993, p. 7) put it, "The government sector can no longer impose its decisions without a fuller consent by the governed."

Power in education has been shifting in different directions: upwards to international organizations, sideways to private institutions and non-governmental organizations, and downwards to local governments and individual schools (Theissens, 2016). Individual choice has increased substantially. People demand individualized and customized public services tailored to their needs. They are more independent of traditional institutions (the state, schools, churches, etc.) but at the same time much more capable of coordinated collective action through mobilizing the networks within which they are embedded.

Governments have responded to these new challenges differently. However, many of them have reacted with a substantial reallocation of the power and competencies of various actors and a restructuring of decision-making processes. First and foremost, in the 1990s many education systems were substantially decentralized: authority was transferred from the central level to lower levels of management (Eurydice, 2007; Radó, 2010). This further weakened the power of central governments to control education processes and outcomes. Nevertheless, the public has continued to attribute most responsibility for the quality of education to central government. This has led to a paradoxical situation in which central-level institutions (such as education ministries) are taken as the main actors for steering education

but at the same time have very few instruments for influencing what actually happens in schools.

In many countries, this has led to counter movements and efforts to regain control over educational institutions using new accountability tools such as standardized testing and performance-based measurement. However, the expectations and requirements of actors are often very diverse and sometimes even incompatible. Moreover, the right to make educational choices is increasingly taken for granted and perceived as a value per se. This leads to a very high level of complexity in education systems. There are manifold interactions among different elements and agents, which can lead to unexpected results and consequences, or to completely new (emergent) phenomena. For instance, the establishment of a number of community schools by active parents can have only local significance for a long time. When a certain threshold is exceeded, however, the phenomenon gains importance far beyond the local community.
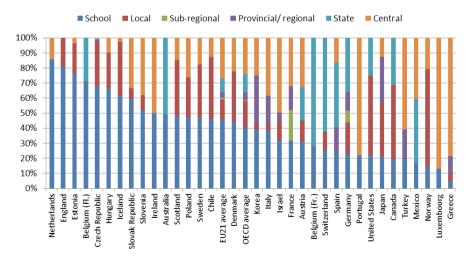
For government to be effective, these networks must be embraced and utilized by public officials. Government cannot steer the networks, but it can—and arguably should—participate in them and if possible and useful, play a leading role in them. Networks are quite different from hierarchies and markets. They do not work on rules and incentives, but on trust. For a person or institution to be heard in a network, she/he must be trusted and respected. In other words, a government official should cooperate with various actors in these networks, not on the basis of authority and supremacy, but as an equal among equals, or perhaps rather primus inter pares (first among equals). This is, however, quite different from the culture and principles that guide the daily work of government bureaucracies.

Education ministries in governance structure

Most people still believe that education ministries are the most powerful institutions in the field. In many countries, however, that is no longer the case. There are profound international differences in terms of who makes key decisions on particular issues (OECD, 2012). In this respect, the *OECD-INES Survey on Locus of Decision Making* analyzed the division of power between levels of government (national, regional, and local authorities, and schools) in lower secondary education using 46 general responsibilities grouped into four domains: organization of instruction, personnel management, planning and structures, and resource management. A questionnaire on "who decides" was completed by a panel of national experts on lower secondary education. The questionnaire sought information on how autonomously decisions were made. The following categories were provided: 1) full autonomy – subject

only to the constraints prescribed in the constitution or in legislation that is of a general nature and not specifically aimed at education; 2) after consultation with, or recommendations from, bodies located at another level within the education system; 3) independently – but within a framework set by a higher authority (e.g., a binding law, a pre-established list of options, a budgetary limit); and 4) other modes.

This methodology clearly has limitations and the data must be taken with caution (see Ainley & McKenzie, 2000; Sherman & Scheerens, 2000). Nevertheless, the survey provides some of the best empirical evidence available. It shows that, in general, the most decentralized countries in terms of decision making are the Netherlands (with 86% of decisions made at the school level), England (81%), Estonia (76%), the Flemish Community of Belgium (71%), and the Czech Republic (68%). A complementary question is what has been left to the center in particular countries (see Figure 1). It is clear from Figure 1 that in Luxembourg, Mexico, Greece, and Portugal the center has preserved substantial influence over many decisions. On the other hand, in such countries as Estonia, Iceland, the Czech Republic, and England, the central level has lost almost all of its power.

Source: OECD (2012), Table D6.1, modified

Figure 1. Percentage of decisions made at each level of government in public lower secondary education (ranked by percentage of decisions at school level) in 2011

Even in the most decentralized countries, however, the central institution (education ministry) is responsible for such measures as setting educational priorities, formulating the legal framework in which schools and other education actors operate, and providing financial resources. It also often serves as the supreme administrative institution to which both schools and individuals may appeal if they think they are not being dealt with fairly and correctly. Thus, even if education ministries do not have direct powers to control schools, they remain highly influential education actors.

Despite the importance of education ministries, there is very little evidence on how these institutions work and what exactly ministry officials do. This is probably due to several reasons. First, ministries are often quite inaccessible organizations and getting permission to study them is not easy. Ministries are also often very diverse institutions, performing different functions. They are responsible for drafting new education laws and legislative amendments. They formulate different types of soft law such as different guidelines and expected standards. Much ministerial work, however, lies outside the area of legislation. Ministries set long-term education goals, determine levels of funding, and approve decisions on all sorts of educational issues (changes in curriculum, teacher certification, etc.) and other issues related to schools and schooling, including highly complex legal, technical, and financial issues (building renovations, school accessibility, etc.). In sum, education ministries are quite diverse and often extensive and complex organizations, not so distinct from large firms (Sack & Saidi, 1997).

Most ministerial work is carried out by civil servants within broad guidelines set by the minister and also by established past practices. A great deal of this work is fairly routine and formalized (Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2007, p. 40). Ministries are organized on the hierarchical principle, with ministers at the top of a vertical line and each subsequent level having lesser authority. It has been well known for a long time that this hierarchical principle may be quite an effective and rational way of organizing large numbers of people (Weber, 1978). In bureaucracy, there are also other reasons for using the organizational principle of hierarchy. It ensures—at least symbolically—that all public officials ultimately fall under the minister, who is in turn accountable to a democratically elected parliament (Theissens, 2016, p. 61). Much ministerial work is also administrative in nature. The hierarchical principle ensures procedural correctness. If there is one official who is ultimately responsible for a decision, then the decision is more predictable and uniform.

It is likely that ministries differ in the degree to which they adhere to the hierarchical principle. In Canada, for instance, many ministerial officials are former educators, which may lead to a different culture than that in countries with strong legalist traditions of public administration, such as Germany. We may infer (or speculate, as there is no empirical knowledge on the subject)

that the organizational culture is even more formalized and hierarchical in the latter countries. Hierarchies are not necessarily completely strict. Much depends upon the culture and climate. A leader (whether a minister or a chief official) might influence how strictly the hierarchical principle is applied.

Case studies of ministries (Hoppe & Jeliazkova, 2006; Page & Jenkins, 2005) show that although many ministry officials are really engaged in routine administrative tasks, much of their daily work entails communication, coordination, and negotiation. These different types of activities are often combined in unexpected and/or idiosyncratic ways, making most policy workers in fact "multi-taskers" (Veselý, 2014). In other words, officials do not simply follow what they have been told to do, or formalized procedures, all of the time.

However, the discretionary powers of ministry officials are quite limited. In any single conflict between their views and those of their superiors, they must completely adhere to the latter. Ministerial officials are civil servants. In contrast to frontline bureaucrats, i.e. people who have direct contact with members of the general public and clients, their room for maneuvering is quite restricted. They live in a culture of compliance with rules and adherence to the views of their superiors. Even more importantly, ministry officials are often quite constrained in communication with actors outside public administration. Because of the subordination principle, they are not allowed to present their own opinions and suggestions, but are supposed to present only those views that have been formally approved by their superiors.

Officials between hierarchies and networks: An empirical illustration

As mentioned above, our knowledge of ministerial work is quite limited. In this section, we will look at some empirical evidence that can illustrate some of the basic arguments. The data come from a survey with a large sample of ministry officials from 11 ministries of the Czech government, including the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS). The survey was conducted between April and July 2013. The target group was defined as all employees of a given ministry except those involved exclusively in its internal operations (car fleet, maintenance, the secretariat, accounting, etc.). The sample comprised 1,340 respondents, including 81 from the MEYS[1].

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[1]   Detailed methodological information about this survey can be found in a separate article (Veselý, 2013). Qualitative in-depth interviews are currently being conducted so as to better understand and interpret the quantitative data.

The questionnaire covered a range of topics, including the nature of respondents' work and their work experience (Veselý, 2014). The present paper will focus on questions from the survey that can shed some light on the topic of this article and that have not been previously analyzed. In so doing, we attempt to give tentative answers to the following questions: To whom do these officials feel the most accountable? How do these different criteria of accountability relate to one another? Are different aspects of accountability at odds with one another?

One of the questions we asked in the survey concerned the criteria that should be used in evaluating the quality of ministry officials' work (Table 1). The purpose of this open-ended question was to determine to whom (or what) officials felt primarily accountable. For the sake of comparison, and also because the sample of MEYS officials was relatively small, we will report findings for both the entire sample and the sample of education ministry officials.

As is clear from Table 1, the officials showed the most agreement with the claim that their work should be judged on compliance with the law. Only less than 5% of public officials disagreed with this statement. This does not seem surprising since all citizens should abide by the law. But it should be emphasized that we asked whether precise compliance with laws is a dimension of the quality of their work. The finding suggests that for these Czech officials a very important attribute of their work is that they correctly construe laws and translate them for other education actors. In other words, they are deeply embedded in the legalist tradition of public administration.

In the total sample of public officials from all ministries, the second most important aspect of work quality was following instructions from immediate superiors. Again, only about 4% disagreed with the statement. This clearly demonstrates that public officials entirely respected the hierarchical nature of ministries and the subordination principle. Officials should strive to comply with instructions from above, and how carefully they do so should be taken as a dimension of how well they are doing their jobs.

The sharpest difference between the entire sample and the sample of education officials concerns the statement that the quality of work should be judged on how their work effectively contributes to improving citizens' lives. This dimension seems to have been more important for education officials than for others. This finding likely relates to the general mission of education, which is more enlightening than is that for such fields as finance. This aspect of contributing to improving lives might be expected to be the strongest in ministries responsible for health, social affairs, and culture. A more detailed analysis (not shown here), however, revealed no such general pattern.

In any event, while in the entire sample following instructions from immediate superiors was more important than contributing to improving

citizens' lives, education officials were slightly more likely to prefer contributing to improving citizens' lives. Nevertheless, most of the dimensions were almost equally—and highly—important. The only statement with which the officials more disagreed than agreed was the one stating that they should consistently follow political assignments (only about 17% agreed with this statement). One possible explanation is that the respondents interpreted any interference in their work by politics as negative. However, this is rather paradoxical since by definition their work is in a sense political, and the top manager of their organization (a minister) is a politician. Instructions from their superiors (to which they strongly adhere) usually have their roots in politically set goals and priorities. Thus, the political seems to be legitimate only if it is transmuted through the bureaucratic process.

Table 1
Perceived accountability of public officials

The quality of my work should be judged by how …		All ministries	MEYS
… precisely I comply with laws.	Agree	87.3 %	84.0 %
	Neither agree nor disagree	8.3 %	11.1 %
	Disagree	4.4 %	4.9 %
	N	1,343	81
… consistently I follow political assignments.	Agree	16.9 %	17.3 %
	Neither agree nor disagree	24.8 %	19.8 %
	Disagree	58.3 %	63.0 %
	N	1,331	81
… how my work effectively contributes to improving citizens' lives.	Agree	69.8 %	80.2 %
	Neither agree nor disagree	24.0 %	14.8 %
	Disagree	6.2 %	4.9 %
	N	1,339	81
… how I follow instructions from my immediate superiors.	Agree	81.9 %	76.5 %
	Neither agree nor disagree	13.7 %	19.8 %
	Disagree	4.4 %	3.7 %
	N	1,340	81

Let us now examine the links among these different dimensions. Table 2 reports the correlation coefficients and their significance. The results for the entire sample and the sample of education officials differ in details, while the general relationships and directions are rather similar across ministries (for the education officials, the lack of statistical significance can be attributed to the small sample size).

Table 2
Correlations between different dimensions of perceived accountability

	All ministries				MEYS			
	Compliance with laws	Following political assignments	Contributing to improving citizens' lives	Following instructions from immediate superiors	Compliance with laws	Following political assignments	Contributing to improving citizens' lives	Following instructions from immediate superiors
Compliance with laws	1				1			
Following political assignments	.207**	1			.216	1		
Contributing to improving citizens' lives	.041	.037	1		.009	.214	1	
Following instructions immediate superiors	.240**	.280**	−.056*	1	.294**	.274*	−.208	1

Notes: Entries are Pearson correlation coefficients. ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed).

As Table 2 shows, compliance with rules was positively correlated with following political assignments and instructions from immediate superiors, while there was no correlation between compliance with rules and contributing to improving citizens' lives. This suggests that compliance with laws is perceived as neither a hindrance to nor a precondition for contributing to society. Rather, it can be interpreted as a constant and necessary condition for doing a quality job.

Following political assignments was positively correlated with legal compliance and with following instructions from superiors. It was unrelated to contributing to improving citizens' lives. Following instructions from immediate superiors was highly correlated with compliance with rules and following political assignments. Thus, there seems to have been an inner affinity between legal compliance, following political assignments, and following instructions from immediate superiors. In contrast, contributing to improving citizens' lives was unrelated to compliance with laws and following political assignments and was negatively correlated with following instructions from immediate superiors.

Factor analysis (not shown here) revealed two underlying factors. The first factor, which I call *adherence,* is formed by legal compliance, following political assignments, and following instructions from immediate superiors. Officials

who scored highly on this factor were likely to value behaving exactly in line with rules, instructions, and formal procedures. In contrast, the second factor, which I call *mission*, is positively loaded by valuing the wider contributions of one's work to society, and negatively loaded by following instructions from superiors. It is neutral in relation to compliance with laws and following political assignments.

The second aspect of the officials' work which is important for the argument in this paper concerns their communication activities (see Table 3).

Table 3
Rates at which ministry officials communicate with various actors

		All ministries	MEYS
Consult or negotiate with central public administration agencies	Never	16.9 %	21.0 %
	Yearly	23.1 %	14.8 %
	Quarterly	17.9 %	23.5 %
	Monthly	26.0 %	23.5 %
	Weekly	10.8 %	11.1 %
	Daily	5.2 %	6.2 %
	N	1,306	81
Consult or negotiate with subordinate agencies of the ministry	Never	20.3 %	25.6 %
	Yearly	17.2 %	9.8 %
	Quarterly	16.6 %	20.7 %
	Monthly	22.0 %	22.0 %
	Weekly	15.7 %	17.1 %
	Daily	8.2 %	4.9 %
	N	1,300	82
Consult or negotiate with local public administration	Never	50.4 %	30.5 %
	Yearly	23.6 %	34.1 %
	Quarterly	11.5 %	18.3 %
	Monthly	9.4 %	9.8 %
	Weekly	2.9 %	4.9 %
	Daily	2.2 %	2.4 %
	N	1,299	82
Consult or negotiate with politicians outside the ministry	Never	72.2 %	82.5 %
	Yearly	19.6 %	15.0 %
	Quarterly	5.3 %	1.3 %
	Monthly	2.4 %	1.3 %
	Weekly	0.4 %	
	Daily	0.2 %	
	N	1269	82

Consult with high-level politicians in the ministry	Never	56.7 %	63.7 %
	Yearly	18.5 %	16.3 %
	Quarterly	8.7 %	6.3 %
	Monthly	9.5 %	6.3 %
	Weekly	4.6 %	6.3 %
	Daily	2.0 %	1.3 %
	N	1,269	82
Consult with other stakeholders	Never	22.0 %	23.2 %
	Yearly	23.9 %	14.6 %
	Quarterly	18.8 %	18.3 %
	Monthly	18.7 %	24.4 %
	Weekly	10.9 %	12.2 %
	Daily	5.7 %	7.3 %
	N	1,284	82
Consult with the public	Never	41.5 %	37.8 %
	Yearly	18.3 %	9.8 %
	Quarterly	10.1 %	12.2 %
	Monthly	13.2 %	15.9 %
	Weekly	8.7 %	13.4 %
	Daily	8.2 %	11.0 %
	N	1,297	82

The data suggests that communication with other public administration organizations, stakeholders, and the general public was an important aspect of the officials' work, though it was limited to particular groups and communication types. There was immense heterogeneity in terms of how often and with whom ministry officials communicate. For instance, while around 38% of education officials reported that they never consult with the public, 24% of them reported doing so on a daily or weekly basis. Similarly, while 21% of education officials reported never consulting or negotiating with central public administration agencies, 18% of them reported doing so daily or weekly. The exception was communication with politicians, which was at most occasional for a majority of the officials.

Further analysis also revealed that the belief that contributing to improving citizens' lives should be a criterion of work quality was positively correlated with communication of all kinds (most notably with communication with the public and other stakeholders). In contrast, there was no correlation between following instructions from others and communication. The only exception was communication with other stakeholders, which was negatively correlated, i.e. people who communicate with stakeholders less frequently were also more prone to claiming that following instructions from superiors should be an important criterion of quality.

Implications and tentative conclusions

The empirical findings provided above are just a brief and partial illustration of the problem. Much more research is needed to understand the complexities of ministry officials' work. It should also be noted that the data cover the Czech Republic. Methodological caveats (e.g., the relatively small sample, limitations to quantitative surveys) must also be mentioned before any attempt to generalize takes place. The findings should be supported by additional in-depth evidence.

Nevertheless, together with other pieces of evidence and scholarly literature, we may formulate some tentative conclusions about the tensions in which ministry officials live. First, it is clear that they still work in organizations that are bureaucratic (in a Weberian sense) and that for them following rules and instructions from superiors is a defining characteristic of their job. They perform tasks that are determined by their superiors and in accordance with rules in which their personality is eliminated wherever possible (Steijn, 2009). In other words, the ministry is still a clear example of a strictly hierarchical organization.

At the same time, however, even ministry officials communicate with other stakeholders, including the public. The officials varied considerably in the extent of such communication, but at least some of them took it as an important part of their work. We cannot tell at the moment how exactly the communication is carried out nor what its substance is. Nevertheless, we may assume that it is a result of greater expectations by various actors that they will be listened to. It has been argued that citizens increasingly expect ministry officials to develop a considerable stature in order to meet the desires of citizens and to be more flexible, environmentally conscious, results-oriented, and willing to cooperate (Steijn, 2009). Similarly, it is possible that even governments (ministries) are starting to understand that in a network society any kind of steering is impossible without engagement with the education networks.

In reality, ministries are still quite closed institutions. As the data above suggests, public education officials, at least in the Czech Republic, feel most like traditional bureaucrats whose role is primarily to create, interpret, and adhere to norms. At least in the Czech Republic, it is not the ministry that promotes and engages in educational debates. Ministry officials are also usually quite reluctant to attend various round tables and public discussions. Despite the importance of communication, direct consultation or communication with the public is rather limited on average.

There are good reasons to believe that ministries are still prototypes of strictly hierarchical organizations, and there is no doubt that the ministries themselves cannot be governed as networks. The vertical principle is necessary to ensure impartial decision making. It is also indispensable in setting strategic

goals and reaching consensus. Coherent policy cannot be designed by a leaderless organizational system (Gladwell, 2010). Many public administration scholars have therefore argued that we need a "neo-Weberian state" instead of decentralization (Lynn, 2008). This means reaffirmation of the state (as the main facilitator of solutions) and of the role of administrative law. It has been argued that particularly in post-communist countries it is very important to build a strong and stable state with professional public service characterized by, among other features, perfectly performed administrative procedures and rules (Randma-Liiv, 2008).

But even proponents of a neo-Weberian state are quite aware that the Weberian ideal of bureaucracy is not appropriate for the contemporary world. They call for a shift from an internal orientation toward bureaucratic rules to an external orientation toward meeting citizens' needs and wishes. Similarly, they argue that bureaucratic principles must be supplemented (but not replaced) by a range of devices for consulting and directly representing citizens' views (Lynn, 2008). Consequently, there is no doubt that the pressure on ministry officials to communicate is—and will continue to be—rising. And as we have argued, in a network society communication is an indispensable tool for any attempt to influence the education system. For instance, to formulate a realistic long-term education strategy requires communicating and cooperating with different types of stakeholders.

There are also other reasons why communication is so important, primarily the fact that it leads to a higher level of trust. In contrast, distrust prevails if the ministry is closed to the public. It is impossible to build trust and consensus without personal communication. Some education ministers are aware of this fact and try to act accordingly, at least rhetorically. For instance, the current Czech Minister of Education stated, "There is a very high level of distrust in the education system, in schools as independent actors, and also in the Ministry of Education. It is one of the things that strongly and negatively surprised me when I became minister" (Valachová, 2016). She also noted the important role of communication, "To reach consensus in the field of education, which I am trying to achieve and would be very happy to see, we need to respect that there are such different opinions, that they are legitimate, and that it is very important to listen to one another and seek the common goal, which is the best education for every child."

Horizontal communication has other benefits as well. As we have seen above, communication increases the level of mission orientation, and possibly also job satisfaction and happiness (Haidt, 2006). However, communication might also be problematic. For officials to engage in open non-hierarchical communication, they cannot be afraid to share their opinions and discuss different points of view. They must have a kind of independence to openly express what they think without worrying that they will be disciplined by

their superiors, or—on the other side of the continuum—that such opinions will be taken as official views of the ministry. Otherwise, communication is highly constrained, ineffective, and unsatisfactory for everybody.

Communication can—and should—lead to deeper understanding of different views. Communication is far from neutral. It often changes our views, and also our perceptions of the people we communicate with. My personal experience is that the perspectives of people in the ministry are often very far from those of people on the front line (principals and teachers). We may assume, and our data seem to support this, that people who are more engaged in communication are more inclined to a mission orientation. At the same time, however, they are less willing to accept the instructions of their superiors if these do not seem to them to be in accordance with the utmost goal of education.

As we have seen, complying with laws is not at odds with serving citizens, but following instructions from superiors might be. The two cultures—open vertical communication and the hierarchical, command-and-control nature of the ministry—might be at odds. They follow two different logics. Central government is governed strictly hierarchically and bureaucratically, while educational institutions are increasingly governed through networks. Officials are governed by laws and commands but they are expected to engage in networks. It is probably not very easy to switch between these two cultures.

There is no clear solution to this. There should be a balance between both governing principles – hierarchy and horizontal communication. My personal view is that the importance of horizontal communication is not yet sufficiently acknowledged, at least in the Czech Republic. The prevailing implicit expectation is that too much communication with stakeholders can imperil the impartiality of officials, or that it can complicate the formulation and implementation of policy. Communication sometimes leads to heated debates, and it is not surprising that officials try to avoid such encounters. By doing so, however, they continue to foster distrust and mutual stereotypes. To support horizontal communication, officials should be provided with more discretion to share their views. At the same time, however, they need a moral compass to help them navigate, which in turn requires enhancing critical thinking, flexibility, and social skills. The role of central government ought to be reconsidered accordingly. It should be viewed more as a facilitator, initiator, mediator, and opinion leader, and less as an institution that governs on the command-and-control principle.

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