

School principals as street-level-bureaucrats at the time of crisis

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Abstract: The paper will focus on school principals at the level of compulsory and public education in the Czech Republic. Czech educational system is highly decentralized and schools are autonomous public organizations on the one hand, but they operate in a highly regulated space on the other hand. School principals are the key actors of the educational system, who are supposed to be both managers and administrators as well as pedagogical leaders, and they are accountable to several different forums (national, regional and local authorities, parents and pupils, teachers) for various types of results. Being a school principal is highly demanding even in “normal” times, the position becomes even more exacting at the time of pandemic and refugee crises when principals have been confronted with completely new and still changing situations characterized by a high level of uncertainty and lack of information.

In our paper we consider school principals as a specific type of street-level-bureaucrats and frontline managers. We will follow two main research questions:

1. How did school principals experience the time of pandemic crisis?
2. How has the pandemic experience influenced the future organizational culture of schools and bureaucratic strategies of the principals?

The first question can be elaborated for example to following secondary questions: What challenges did they face and how did they cope with the new situation? How did they deal with changing and contradictory rules? What information path and decision-making strategies did they use? How did they manage their own emotions and emotions of other people in the school community? The second one covers the following secondary questions: How has the pandemic experience influenced the response to the refugee crisis? How has the pandemic experience been reflected in personal and organizational resilience?

Our research is based on qualitative data from two focus groups and ten individual interviews with school principals. It covers 24 principals from public schools at the level of compulsory education (ISCED 1 and ISCED 2) of various characteristics (11 men and 13 women; various length of leadership experience from 2 to almost 30 years; various sizes of schools from 100 to 800 pupils; situated both in large cities in Czech regions and middle-sized towns as well as the small municipalities). Legislative, advocative, strategic and methodical documents on the national and local level are used as supplement data.

The paper can contribute to conceptualization of school principals as street-level-bureaucrats and to discussion about the response of street-level bureaucratic organizations to unexpected events and crises.