High autonomy and low accountability: Case study of five Czech schools [1]

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Abstract: The paper aims to describe the effects of a unique combination of high autonomy and low outcome accountability of the Czech schools. First, the paper outlines test-based accountability as a key concept of contemporary educational policy. Next, the research design is briefly described and the qualitative data on the effects of school choice and curriculum autonomy / decentralisation are presented. The discussion stresses the problem of time frame in evaluating system wide interventions and also sketches a vision of new emerging school reform discourse. Processes of change in five Czech "combined" primary and lower secondary schools were studied by qualitative longitudinal multiple case study for over 5 years. Surprisingly, the results suggest that many negative effects ascribed to the high-stakes tests (e. g. curriculum narrowing, fabrication of image) could be seen in the studied schools despite the different model of governance in the Czech Republic. The contemporary discussion of risks of (high stake) testing should be complemented by a similar analysis of both costs and negative effects of the absence of outcome accountability.

Keywords: school improvement, educational reform, transition, Czech Republic, multiple case study

Standardised testing and accountability became mainstream policies across many dimensions of school life**,** not only in their traditional strongholds in Western Europe and North America, but also in Central and Eastern Europe (Eurydice, 2009; UNESCO, 2007). Many academics, however, complain about the "totalizing and terroristic dominance" (Chua, 2009, p. 160) of this discourse of performance and enumerate the unintended and/or negative effects of these policies. We discuss a complementary problem here. The primary and lower secondary schools in the Czech Republic were granted

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an extremely high degree of autonomy but no national data about pupil outcomes were collected by state authorities. In this paper, we describe some effects of this unique combination of high autonomy and low outcome accountability on the behaviour of schools.

1 Theoretical and historical contexts

Accountability is a policy promoted by national governments and transnational actors as a strategy for attacking low quality and inequity in education as well as in other public services. Under process (input) accountability teachers or schools are expected to use certain methods and strategies to achieve the goals of education. Outcome accountability (accountability for results) means that schools should generate measureable outcomes (usually test results) without the need to prove how they did it. In reality blended systems are often used (Tetlock et al., 2013). Many authors, however, use the term "school accountability" as an equivalent for the *outcome* accountability systems only.

Outcome accountability systems usually evaluate the school performance on the basis of standardised assessment results (test-based accountability). Bruns, Filmer and Petrinos (2011, pp. 2–3) list three key lines of accountability for results: (1) *information reforms* publicise the data about school results to enable the pupils and their parents to make choices and hold the providers accountable; (2) *reforms of school management* provide the schools with increased autonomy to control key resources (money, people, curriculum etc.); (3) under *incentive policies* teachers or the whole schools are sanctioned for the results. [2] The publicised and/or sanctioned results tend to be based on testing aligned with performance standards.

School accountability reforms often go hand in hand with another reform policy – parental choice of schools creating a (quasi) market in education. An accountability system indicates to parents whether individual schools provide adequate education. The school choice policy gives them the right to choose a school for their child using the information on how well schools are doing (West & Peterson, 2006). As well as in any other sector, for educational market to work reliable information must be available (OECD, 2013c).

[2] Complementary strategies are the involvement of private sector to create more competitive market for education and reforms devolution of powers and resources from central Ministry of Education to regional level of governance (Bruns, Filmer, & Petrinos, 2011, p. 21).

Despite the widespread use of outcome accountability in many developed as well developing countries, this educational policy is denounced by many critics. According to its opponents, the accountability policies based on standardised testing are not effective in achieving the intended goal – "raising the bar and closing the gap". Besides, the high-stakes testing is believed to have many unintended negative effects such as the de-professionalisation of teachers, teaching to the test – narrowing the curriculum and overemphasizing decontextualized skills, cheating and many others (e. g., Bellmann & Weiß, 2009; de Wolf *&* Janssens, 2007).

While the accountability policies (or high-stakes testing) are subject to intense critique, there is broad agreement that "learning outcomes should be monitored" (Unesco, 2007, p. 67). Pupil learning assessments provide the indispensable feedback to policy-makers. The tests based on sample surveys may be used for system monitoring purposes. Despite that, some low-stake assessments test the whole pupil population to provide every child of a certain age (and the parents) with information about his or her strengths and weaknesses and about his or her knowledge and skills across the classroom, school, region or the whole school system.

2.1 Accountability and reforms in the Czech Republic

Historically in Central Europe the traditional and very influential German model of schooling promoted neither the use of standardised assessment nor accountability. The governance of school systems was based on the bureaucratic/professional mechanisms of a high degree of centralised state regulation. The state supervision was focused on a prescription of inputs/processes, not on the measurement of outcomes. According to Humboldtian vision of education expressed in the term *Bildung*,

> what is most important about education – the aesthetic ends, the search for freedom and truth, the ennobling exposure to history and so on – is simply not measurable. And so it was not measured. The national government had no legal authority to measure pupil achievement or progress, the teachers were opposed and the states had no interest in measuring these things. (OECD, 2011a, p. 208)

Despite that, the important countries in Central Europe like Poland and, above all, the Federal Republic of Germany (Klieme et al., 2004; Neumann, Fischer, & Kauertz, 2010) introduced nation-wide compulsory testing in their educational systems. Schools in these countries are now required to demonstrate

measurable learning outcomes. Overall the prevalence of national assessments in Central and Eastern Europe increased from 25% to 65% between the 1990s and the 2000s (Unesco, 2007, p. 69). The Eurydice (2009) study found that the vast majority of EU countries use national tests at primary and lower secondary levels. Only the Czech Republic, Greece, and Liechtenstein did not hold the national tests in 2009.[3] Thus the Czech Republic, with no national assessment (neither high-stakes nor low-stakes) of learning in primary and lower secondary schools, has become quite a unique case.[4]

In the 1990s, after the collapse of Communism, the early system-wide reforms that were performed by the right-wing governments were strongly influenced by the neoliberal ideology. The reforms granted parents considerable choice over which school their child would attend. It was expected that the parents' right to choose the school that best served their child and financing per capita would stimulate the competition among schools, and in long term *would* increase the quality of teaching, learning and educational outcomes. This market mechanism, however, was transplanted into a Central European context that was hostile to the idea of testing for information accountability purposes at that time. So the key assumption of the market – that parents have the necessary information to choose the schools (OECD, 2013c, p. 54) – was not fulfilled. Some leading Czech or Slovak academics' critical voices echo their Western counterparts and continue to denounce not only the policies based on the testing as neo-liberal governmentality, but also problematise the use of (standardised) achievement tests for assessment purposes per se (e. g. Štech, 2011; Kaščák & Pupala, 2011, 2012).

In the first decade of the new century, the responsibility of Czech schools for resource allocation has increased substantially.[5] School directors have great control over budgets and staff now but the other side of the coin is represented by an increase in administrative burden on school directors. Everyday responsibilities of school principals (financial, legal and personal

[3] A small German-speaking community in Belgium and Wales did not use the national tests either but in the latter case this praxis has been disputed as the achievement of Welsh pupils is poor when compared to the rest of the United Kingdom.

[4] Two attempts to introduce compulsory tests in the last grade of both primary and lower secondary schools (grade 5 and grade 9) were discontinued within the past ten years. The schools can use the tests developed and sold by several commercial providers. Since 2014, the national tests for system-level monitoring based of sample surveys shall be run every year.

[5] The transformation to the new legal status giving the school greater responsibility for resource allocation has been optional since 1990s and obligatory for every school since 2003.

management issues) leave virtually no time for the instructional leadership (McKinsey & Co., 2010). Another major educational reform of primary and lower secondary education has been implemented in the Czech Republic since 2007. This time, the policy was devised by left-wing government. The reform deepened and institutionalised the previous trends towards the wide autonomy of schools in the areas of curriculum and pupil assessment. School-based curriculum development was the key element of the reform and such curricula developed obligatorily by the school staff replaced the traditional centralised syllabi. As Figure 1 shows, the degree of autonomy perceived by Czech school directors is very high. (The figure compares OECD countries only but the data for all countries participating in PISA 2012 would provide a similar picture – only Macao, China, would join the group of three countries with the maximal values of both dimensions of autonomy.)[6]

Such wide autonomy (specifically the autonomy in resource allocation) is believed to be an advantage when balanced by adequate accountability measures (OECD, 2011b). This is not the case of Czech schools. This assertion may sound as an unsupported claim because the data from PISA 2012 school questionnaire seem to show an average level of school accountability in the Czech Republic when measured by indicators such as the share of schools, where school performance is compared against regional or national benchmarks or publicly posting the information about pupils' achievement (OECD, 2013c). The responses of Czech directors in the PISA 2012 questionnaire, however, were probably influenced by their experience with the try-outs of large-scale national standardised assessments held in 2012 and 2013, assessments that were abolished after the new government came to power in 2014. While national content standards have been set recently, there are no national benchmarks in a strict sense. The tests provided by commercial publishers are used by schools on a voluntary basis. As there are no rules for posting the test results, there is a wide space for gaming the system (as our research illustrated).

[6] It is noteworthy that despite the high autonomy and absence of performativity policies, neither Czech adolescents nor their teachers seem to be happy in the Czech schools (OECD, 2013b; OECD, 2014).

The question arises what effects might result from this rather unique combination of high school autonomy, low information accountability and considerable school choice in the Czech educational system.

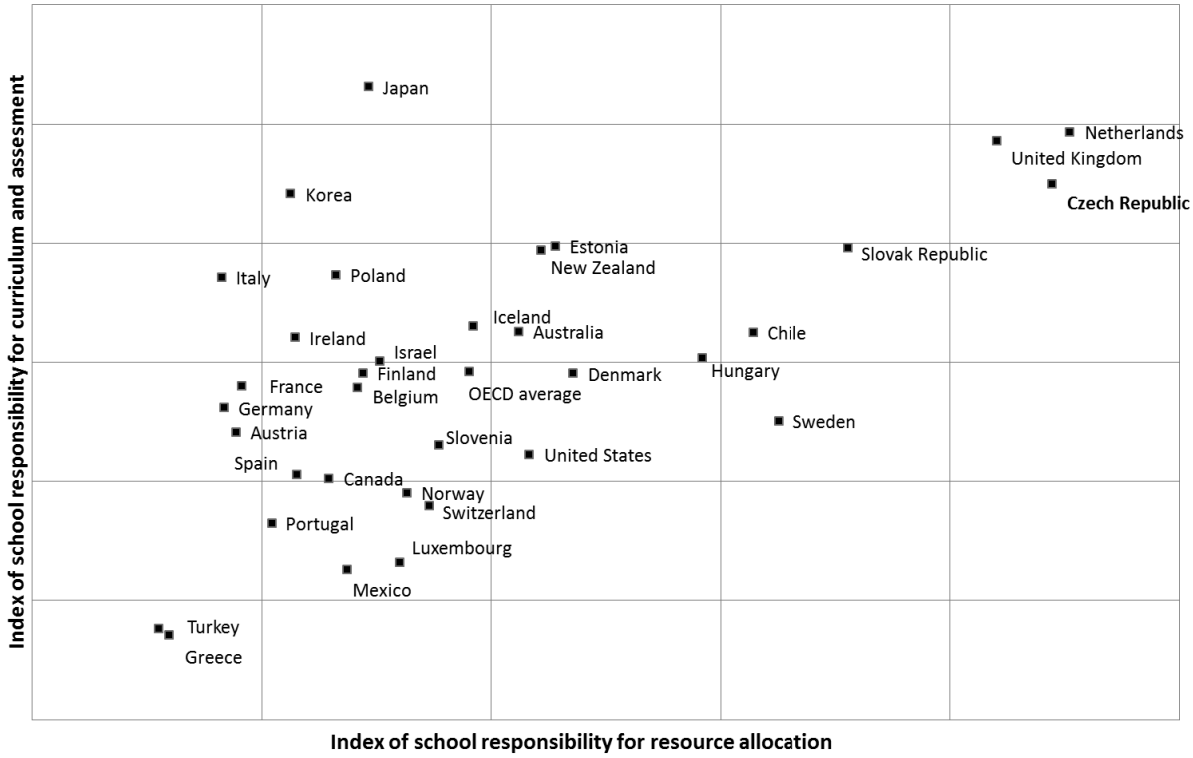

Figure 1. The autonomy of schools in OECD countries as perceived by school directors (Data: OECD, 2013c).

1.2 Research questions

The effects of the recent curricular reform have been systematically monitored on the level of upper secondary general education (Janík et al., 2011; Píšová et al., 2011). On the level of ISCED 1 and ISCED 2, only a limited number of features were studied, most of them being the beliefs and attitudes of teachers or parents (Moree, 2013; Straková, 2010, 2013; Straková et al., 2013; Walterová et al., 2010). Our longitudinal research adds to the existing knowledge on reforms in transition countries. The main emphasis is put on the interaction between the processes of inner school development and the top-down mandated educational reform.

We have two broad goals: (1) The study of the effects of structural properties of the Czech compulsory education system (e. g. organisational unity of primary and lower secondary levels within single school organizations; the early selection of pupils into selective grammar schools and "comprehensive" tracks; the school choice, the absence of national monitoring of outcomes) on learning and teaching in individual schools. (2) The school and classroom level change processes (changes in learning, teaching and school management) in the context of the major national curricular reform.

In this paper, we would like to answer the following two research questions:

1. What mechanisms of change can be identified in the five schools in the past five years?
2. How do the schools cope with the unique situation of high autonomy and low accountability?

2 Methods

In the years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013, we studied the current picture of teaching, learning and instructional leadership in five Czech basic schools (i.e. comprehensive primary and lower secondary schools) using the research design of qualitative multiple case study (Stake, 2005). The multiple case study is particularly suitable for the analysis of the common social norms and constraints behind the everyday work of individual schools, as well as for the description of unique contextual influences. The longitudinal design and time frame of the study enabled us to look at medium to long-term effects of policy changes.

2.1 Sample

A set of five schools from different parts of the Czech Republic was chosen by theoretical sampling, based on the assumptions about the role of context, particularly the degree of competition for pupils among neighbouring schools. Although not a representative sample, the schools represent different types (state/Catholic; urban/suburban/rural; small/medium/large school). All of them, however, are comprehensives and serve children in grades 1–9. Only one school, dubbed here as Selective, used to be a specialised school focused on foreign language teaching but this special profile has been somewhat fading in recent years as many other schools make English their priority and two foreign languages must be taught in every school now.

Table 1
The schools in multiple case study

	Community size (inhabitants)	Unemployment in community (2011, in %)	Established/ governed by	Distance to next school (km)	Recent development
Diverse	3 723	7	Community	2	Genuine efforts for quality of services, and simultaneously complex micro-politics and power games inside the school and within the local community.
Highlands	2 790	8	Community	7	Very stable school in a small highland town. Successful school development projects supported by EU grants: ICT, local history, ELT, may be seen as a learning community.
Selective	over 1 milion	4	Church	0,3	Facing fierce competition of other schools in major city. A charismatic founding school director has retired after 20 years recently.
Small	1 443	3,6	Community	2,4	Near a major city. Almost closed 8 years ago, since then successful turnover. Today attractive and fast growing.
Suburban	9 462	3,8	Community	1	Very fast growth of pupil population due to dynamic development of suburban community. Rather conservative school with the strategy of continuous improvement of some areas in small steps.

At the beginning of the study two of the schools faced serious problems with a lack of pupils due to parents' preference of other schools in the community (the Small school) or due to frequent pupil transitions to selective grammar schools after grade 5 or after grade 7 (the Selective school). On the contrary, two schools (Highlands and Diverse) had very stable pupil populations. One school had been expanding quickly and operating above the full capacity because the new suburbs in the immediate vicinity supplied plenty of children (Suburban).

2.2 Data collection and analysis

The main data collection was performed in the first year of the reform[7] and again five years later. Extensive triangulation of methods and data sources was used to collect data from the schools. Besides interviewing the teachers and school administrators, we observed both classroom instruction and extracurricular activities. The school curricula, inspection reports and other documents were analysed as well. The pupils of grades 6 and 9 were interviewed using the focus group method. These mainly qualitative data were supplemented by staff's social climate measurements (questionnaire OCDQ-RS). In this paper, we use mainly the data from the interviews with school leaders and staff and from school documents.

The data were coded and narrative descriptions were constructed for each case stressing its unique context and the change (or stability) of leadership and teaching practices. Finally, the cross-case analysis using cross-case displays was performed, looking for the key issues that emerged in the single cases and topics. The data collection and analysis is described in detail by Dvořák et al. (2010).

To enhance the quality and credibility of our study, we used the sequential research design. The individual case (school) studies followed one another. In this way all three authors took part in field research in every school and contributed to the case report (investigator triangulation). Despite that, all possible sources of bias have not been avoided: all three researchers are middle-aged white males which might influence our perspective. Our stance is influenced by our autobiography (Ball, 2000). We all spent half of our lives

[7] In school year 2007–2008 all schools had to use new curricula developed by the school staff in the 1st and 6th grades. In the following years the new curricula have been introduced to all grades.

under the Communist rule. The idea of judging and comparing individuals and schools based on measurable outputs (performativity) may be attractive to us because in Communist state the status and incentives depended mainly on one's class origin and manifested Party loyalty instead of abilities or hard work. We felt this possible source of bias should be declared here.

Another technique used to enhance the quality of research was member checking (participant validation): every draft case report was presented to the school management and volunteers from the staff, and the comments obtained were used to improve the report. As a result of the long-term contact with the schools, high level of rapport was built with some respondents. In some cases the information provided to us seemed to be very open and honest.

3 Results

The qualitative data on the effects of school choice, resource and curriculum autonomy are presented.

3.1 The school choice

Five years ago the effects of market mechanisms (school choice) introduced in the 1990s were clearly seen in the schools in urban areas like the Small school and the Selective school. In the Small school the lack of pupils due to parents' preference of other schools in the area contributed to school restructuring: The school director and his deputy were replaced. After the new director had been appointed, half of the old staff left and new teachers were hired. Since then the school's situation has changed significantly. The number of pupils exceeded the school capacity as two thirds of the first graders come out of the catchment area now. In the absence of information accountability, the increase in the quantity of pupils is the main tactical goal and the main indicator of the school improvement. When asked "How would you characterise the situation of your school at the moment?", the school director talked mainly about the steady growth of pupils' intake. The only other point he mentioned was the stability of the staff in the last years. So the pupils' results are not explicitly considered.

Today the school choice is taking ground even in the semi-rural Highland school area. The Highland school is a single school in a small town (2.8 thousand inhabitants). For geographic and social reasons we expected

the least favourable conditions for parent's choice to be here. Five years ago market forces did not press on change. Many people in the community work in blue-collar jobs, some are migrant workers from Slovakia. The educational aspirations of local families are not high. The school is in a hilly region and the next fully organised school (i. e. school with grades 1–9) is approx. 7 km away in a similar small town (dubbed in this research Lipová). Despite that, the school displays a number of favourable features. It has very stable staff and very good staff climate. The school can be regarded as a learning community – all teachers participate in ongoing development of their ICT skills. The effects of this effort are clearly visible in the wide and skilled use of computers and interactive whiteboards in instruction.

Between the Highland community and Lipová lies the village of Lhota (5 km away from the Highland school). Every year some half-dozen children leave the village nursery. Lhota is closer to Lipová (the distance is 3 km) and belongs to Lipová catchment area[8].

> It was a tradition that all children from Lhota went automatically to school in Lipová no matter where the parents commuted to. The parents did not choose. Now the pattern has changed. In recent years half of the children from Lhota enter our first grade and half of them go to Lipová,

reports the Highland school director and admits that she visits the Lhota nursery and "talks to the parents". So not only the affluent urban parents are exercising their right to choose today.

The competition for enrolment also limits the co-operation or networking of the neighbouring schools, mainly to extra-curricular activities (like athletic events such as those in the Suburban school). Schools are very reluctant to share what they regard as the key know-how related to the core educational processes. First signs of the different approach could be found in the Small school, where a genuine effort to help a struggling school in vicinity was observed.

The school choice in the absence of national benchmarks led to the paradoxical situation in the Suburban area. In this rapidly growing community there are two schools not far away from each other, one of them being the Suburban. The Suburban school has plenty of pupils now and had to increase its capacity recently due to its demographic context.

[8] Catchment areas were not abolished but parents are free to choose the school out of the area.

Attracting all pupils from the catchment area seems to be more of a question of prestige than an economic need. Surprisingly, the challenging standards for its pupils the school tries to set and maintain might be an obstacle in this effort.

The school serves very diverse children population from both (upper-) middle class families from newly built suburbs and those from more rural parts of the catchment area. The school faces the problem of very diverse parent expectations. During our 2013 visits to the Suburban school, teachers expressed their worries that some parents would transfer their children to the other school in the area to avoid the (perceived) high demands in Suburban school. Indeed, parents complain about what they perceive as too demanding standards e.g. in secondary history and physical education classes. Since the national curricular framework is very vague and national benchmarks for the subjects are not being set, the school director (P. E. teacher himself) was lacking the foundation to evaluate the history teacher's approach. The science teacher in the same school reports similar problems: "I don't know how to convince [both parents and pupils] that my requirements really are at the very minimum."

In all studied schools, parents exercise their right to choose the school. The Selective school is often attended by children from Christian families living outside the catchment area but the size of the building limits the possibility to increase the school intake. Sometimes, like in the Small one, the increasing intake seems to be regarded as an important or even the main reliable indicator of school success. It is interesting to note that some schools do genuinely improve in the absence of the strong pressure of school choice (Highlands) or even try to maintain the demanding standards at the price of losing some pupils (Suburban). In the latter case the school choice might mean that some parents would choose another school with less demanding academic standards.

3.2 Curricular autonomy and goals of education

Many authors worry that the test-based accountability and output evaluations reduce the school curricula to the tested core subjects (typically literacy and numeracy skills). Yet the high curriculum autonomy may lead to another form of reduction as well. When talking about their curricular priorities, all schools more or less focused on quality of English (or broadly foreign) language teaching and learning – three school leaders mentioned it as the top task of their

school development. The foreign languages (and ICT skills) are perceived as the most important outcome of education in the Small school by the deputy director: "We work hard to prepare these kids in the best way. This means these [foreign] languages, these computers." Market mechanism is probably at work here as the English language is a skill highly valued by Czech parents (Walterová et al., 2010). Therefore other subjects or skills might get less attention. Indeed, some data from commercial testing companies suggest that English is the subject where Czech pupils have improved during past years.

Table 2
Some evidence related to curricular narrowing

Diverse school, Director	I feel we improved the [foreign] languages compared to previous years, but we might have a problem in mathematics, we score far better in languages than in mathematics.
Diverse school, Teacher	The kids are overloaded with [foreign] languages. And CLIL is being introduced despite we [the teachers] do not speak English.
Highland (field notes)	The school puts special emphasis on ICT and English for all seven years we follow it. This is probably one of the reasons pupils do not leave for eight-year grammar schools at all.
Selective school, Director	Our first improvement goal is strengthening of the foreign language teaching. We revised the school curriculum and allocated some extra lessons to foreign languages. Next year we would like to provide the opportunities for foreign language talk during afternoon or extracurricular programmes.
Selective school, Primary teacher	This is a renowned school. It is widely known we maintain the standards, we have these languages, and we are open to these kids with learning disorders or behaviour issues or so.
Small school, Deputy director	Simply, our goal has been that the kids learn one foreign language really well. We have some subsidies so we can teach English from grade one.
Suburban, Social studies teacher	What do we want from the kids after all? All subjects except Czech, maths, and, well, a foreign language, are only marginal. The kids say: "Silly geography. Silly history. They cannot let me fail in geography or history."

We have seen, however, that the Suburban school tries to instil the traditional broad curriculum. The management dares risk the conflict with parents over the challenging standards even in non-core subjects of history and P. E. One reason for this might be that the surplus of school-age children due to a demographic boom in the local community gives the management the real curricular autonomy. Thus the management can follow a bit conservative curricular policy (for good and bad).

In the absence of national standardised testing, some schools (such as Selective or Suburban) use their own non-standardised assessment tools developed by the school staff or purchase the tests from commercial providers (Small or Selective). When the school leaders repeatedly use their home-made tests, they can monitor the changes of average achievement from year to year but they cannot compare their school results with other schools or with regional or national performance. This is in agreement with macro-level data on the purposes of pupil assessment in the Czech Republic (OECD, 2013c, p. 149). Subject Olympiads in academic domains (e.g. regional mathematical or science Olympiad) and the results of athletic and artistic competitions are used as a proxy indicator of school quality as well.

Schools that use external commercial testing services sometimes post the results publicly but the director of Small school admits the strategic choice of released test data. The Small school is still coping with the legacy of previous school management. The classes in grades 7–9 are very small (around 10 pupils) and the share of pupils at risk in these grades is above average.[9] The high variance of the test results in such a small groups is obvious. Therefore the director carefully chooses the data that shall be publicised – the less favourable data are used for internal purposes only. This practice is in technical agreement with the law as the school is obliged neither to take the test nor to publish the results.

3.3 Low accountability and the issues of equity

The goals of accountability policies usually include not only the promotion of excellence, but also the increase in *equity*. In the Czech schools studied, the inequality of educational opportunity is perceived (Table 3) but schools have not established systematic policies to overcome it. According to the director of the Selective school, in case of underachievement

> it depends more or less on parents – if they are genuinely interested and want to do something. When the family does not collaborate, [our effort] is just a waste of time. The child cannot make it alone.

When asked about the measures for overcoming socio-economic disadvantages, some teachers or school leaders start talking about possible medical conditions of underachieving pupils (like chronical disease or ADHD). They

[9] There were five times more first-graders than nine-graders in the Small school in the academic year 2012–2013.

add they try to learn more about the special-needs children. So the problem of underachievement is seen as of individual rather than social origin. Most often the school management reports that the form and intensity of support is at the discretion of individual teachers. A typical available opportunity is the second chance to take the test.

Table 3
Cross-case data on attitudes to the disadvantaged children

Diverse, Teacher	The biggest trouble is dealing with the kids from the disadvantaged families. In case of a lower socioeconomic level of the family, the potential of those kids if often higher than the actual support in their family. They could advance but the stimuli from the family are missing. This is a kid that could go on, he or she has some talents but lacks stimulation. And then these kids mix with the children from well-situated families at school and new problems emerge…
	We try to deal with these issues. We attend courses. If there is a short-term course, somebody from our school attends. I believe we try to learn about it. The school does not neglect it. We have a counsellor and a school psychologist. So if we encounter the problem in the classroom, we deal with it.
Highlands, Director	There is quite a large group of disadvantaged pupils here but it is not extremely large. We can deal with it. The support is up to the teachers. They provide some extra help after the classes or maybe before the classes. There is no system organized by the school management. Some kids need help from time to time, so the teacher intervenes. Mrs. K. [the math teacher] is at school one hour before the classes every day, so the kids automatically come and ask her for the help. And me too. I am here every morning too. They can come and try the test again or so. So the terms are negotiated with the individual pupil.
Highlands, Teacher	There are some kids that lack ambitions or motivation. What do you want to do with it? It is all in the families. See, I know those people. I live here, so I know the parents. I taught them too. You can just be sorry. I just say, oh my God. I like these kids and I believe some will change their attitudes when they grow older. But if you know the families – what can be expected from the kids? I have my limits. I am not a social worker. […] This is my defence as well, I am not their mom, surely not.
Selective, Director	We monitor the pupils with poor achievement and the solutions are discussed the at the staff meetings. Sometimes it is caused by the pupil's intellect. In case of learning disorders we routinely use individual educational program. If the achievement problems are caused by illness, the homeroom teacher informs the staff and we postpone the assessment or requirements are lessened.

Table 3
continued

Small, Director	We have many kids with a rather bad social background. It is really difficult then. We know we cannot rely on the support of the family. If the family is dysfunctional, our efforts are desperate. We are grateful when such children learn basic habits at school – be it work habits or hygienic habits or some social relationships are built. It is really a complex challenge in some cases.
	We can provide some individualized care in smaller classes. If the size of the class is over twenty, it's difficult. It depends a lot on the homeroom teacher. The help provided depends a lot on the subject teachers in the lower secondary grades. They might prepare some extra tasks or they might follow a slightly different path in case of some pupils. If they see that the kid does not cope they might assign a bit simplified task.
Suburban, Teacher 1	[The children in need of extra care] come from the socially weaker families. I have a boy [in my class] and his mom is alone with two kids. Well, single parent families. I would say this would be the case. And then the athletes, they train five times every week. They live in their own world, the priorities are set differently. But most of all, single moms. There are many of them and that is where the problems are, indeed.
Suburban, Teacher 2	[In case of some children] the lack of support, the profound lack of support is obvious. But not at first sight. [What kind of support is available for them?] It is very individual as we lack time. Well, it is on the edge. In my case, if they fail the test, they can come every morning at 7.15 AM and try the test again. So they would get a better grade and the average would be better as well. They have this possibility. Some use it and some do not…

This is in agreement with the survey results (Straková, 2010, p. 306) showing that the Czech school leaders and teachers do not care much about the relation between the pupil's socioeconomic background and their achievement. This complements the fact that the Czech Republic remains to be a country with low equity of educational achievement (OECD, 2013b). E. g. the proportion of the variation in mathematics performance explained by the socioeconomic status of the pupil is relatively very high. There are significant regional disparities in both reading and mathematical literacy (also associated with pupil SES).

4 Discussion

Our analysis was focused on three features of the Czech educational policy: (1) the freedom of parents to choose a school, (2) the high autonomy and (3) low accountability of schools and teachers.

The school choice seems to be a mechanism at work in the Czech compulsory schooling. It might take some time before the parents in rural areas (such as in the case of the Highland school) start to use their new right. The change of culture followed the change of law with a delay. The high curricular autonomy granted by the recent reform is not seen as a major change or step forward by many teachers in the schools studied. In some sense the reform just institutionalised and deepened the trends of the past phases of post-socialist transition.

Despite the fact that we wanted to study the effects of recent curricular reform, we might observe mainly the results of the previous market-oriented reforms of the 1990s. Indeed, some authors suggest that the real influence of the school system reforms can only be seen in the long-term perspective of several decades (Tamir, 2004; Viñao, 2001). The implementation and first results of the Czech curricular reform (launched in 2007) have been disappointing on a range of measures (Janík, 2013; Janík et al., 2011; Straková et al., 2013) but this conclusion should be seen in the light of the previous statement about the short- and long-term perspectives.

The perceived failure of the reforms may be the result of a historical stance (Viñao, 2001). Indeed, some key steps of the Czech reform schedule (as the monitoring of school outcomes or the abolition of elite lower secondary grammar schools) that were expected to precede the devolution of responsibilities to schools have not been completed yet. Another and more pessimistic explanation is that the widespread lack of capacity, distrust to traditional institutions (the Ministry of Education being one of them), and the rise of populist parties in the Czech Republic (as in some other countries of Central and Eastern Europe) may hinder the implementation of any complex reform. The Czech school system might remain stuck in the capability trap (Pritchett, 2013; Pritchett, Woolcock, & Andrew, 2010). This is in agreement with the note that the expected end of the post-socialist (or post-Communist) transformation is being postponed repeatedly in relevant literature (Greger, 2011).

The school market in the Czech Republic operates without a key ingredient – transparent and comprehensive information on school outcomes. Moreover, it is not clear whether parents give sufficient priority to their children's high achievement in the core curricular areas when making their choices (OECD, 2013c). Despite these doubts, PISA 2012 data signal that while "system level correlations in PISA do not show a relationship between the degree of competition and pupil performance", at the school level in many countries,

> schools that compete for pupil enrolment with other schools tend to show better performance, before accounting for schools' socio-economic intake. […] Only in the Czech Republic and Estonia do schools that compete with other schools for pupils in the same area tend to perform better, on average, than schools that do not compete, after accounting for the socio-economic status and demographic background of pupils and schools and various other school characteristics. (OECD, 2013c, p. 54)

So it seems that in the Czech Republic some parents might discover a good school without the big data from national assessment while other parents might prefer choosing a less demanding (underperforming) school.

The Czech school system features an unusual mixture of high autonomy and low outcome accountability. Our research shows that in this hybrid system some negative affects ascribed to high-stakes test policies are present as well. The load of administrative work is very high despite the facts that almost no tests are used in the schools (McKinsey & Co., 2010). The curriculum narrowing might happen in a system with no testing in a way similar to the system under the pressure of standardised testing. There are more strategies of fabrication and impression management (Ball, 2000) than the example from the Small school quoted above.

Overcoming socioeconomic disadvantage is usually the key aim of accountability policies (e.g. No Child Left Behind). While no case we studied could be labelled as a school serving severely disadvantaged pupil population, all five schools face the problems of children from disadvantaged or dysfunctional families.[10] But the schools do not tackle the problem of underachievement by establishing a school-wide policy of support system (even though some provide counselling or psychological help).

[10] Least of all probably the Selective school which uses entrance examinations.

The high level of school autonomy, both over resources and curriculum, leads to permanent overload of management. Representative surveys (McKinsey and Co., 2010; OECD, 2014) confirm that the Czech school leaders struggle with administrative tasks and site maintenance issues more than their counterparts in many other countries. They also allocate less time to instructional leadership.[11] That may be one of the reasons why the support of underachieving pupils depends on the good will of individual teachers. Given the low equity of educational achievement in the Czech Republic, any future research shall pay more attention to the issue of equity.

5 Conclusion

The discussion of the risks of (high stake) testing should be complemented by a similar analysis of costs and negative effects of the absence of outcome accountability. The Czech school system has been facing serious problems according to the PISA and TIMSS achievement studies (cf. Mullis et al., 2012; OECD, 2013a). In this light, the narrowing of curricular core and the absence of shared academic standards that we described should be seriously considered.

A more balanced approach beyond false dichotomy of accountability vs. school autonomy and a new grand narrative "at the intersection of the two" duelling narratives is needed (Spillane, 2012; Šíp, 2013) not only in the Czech Republic. Different policies shall be seen as complementary and mutually supportive rather than conflicting (Hopkins, 2010). All the classroom, school, regional and national levels of school system have to be changed (Fullan, 2005). But the reliance on just one improvement mechanism (either school autonomy or external accountability, a curriculum reform or market forces or networking of schools…) is the central fallacy of many school reforms (Hopkins, 2013).

[11] As the schools are relatively small, they cannot afford large administrative staff. The extreme case is the Highland school where there is no administrative staff, the bookkeeping is outsourced and the school caretaker teaches some classes (handicraft and design). Surprisingly, in the Highland school the staff development is at the very good level.

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Vysoká autonomie, malá akontabilita: Případová studie pěti českých škol

Abstrakt: Článek upozorňuje na efekty vysoké úrovně autonomie při současné nízké odpovědnosti za výsledky v případě českých základních škol. Jsou načrtnuty základní principy akontability jako klíčového pojmu současné vzdělávací politiky a stručně je popsán použitý výzkumný plán. Pak jsou představena data ilustrující efekty volby školy, autonomie školy v oblasti alokace zdrojů a kurikulární decentralizace. V diskusi je mj. zmíněn problém časové škály pro hodnocení efektů reformy a otevřena otázka potřeby nového přístupu k autonomii a akontabilitě škol. Po dobu více než pěti let sledujeme za použití převážně kvalitativních longitudinálních postupů vývoj pěti českých plně organizovaných základních škol. Výsledky naznačují, že některé efekty, považované za negativní a připisované plošnému testování a na něj navázaným politikám, lze překvapivě pozorovat ve zkoumaných školách, ačkoli v český vzdělávací systém řadu prvků akontability nezavedl. Současná bohatá literatura o rizicích spojených s plošným testováním by si zasloužila doplnění o studie rizik a negativních efektů projevujících se tam, kde výsledky žáků nejsou systematicky sledovány a využívány.

Klíčová slova: rozvoj školy, vzdělávací reforma, tranzice, Česká republika, vícepřípadová studie