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Patterns of actorship in legitimation of educational changes: The role of transnational and local knowledge

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Abstract

This paper examines how different meanings of knowledge (transnational, comparative, statistical, local, and personal) relationally stabilise the agential position for the legitimation of educational reform across state and non-state actors. Analysing the materiality and systems of reason of proposals to reform education in the pre-election debates in the Czech Republic, the focus is placed on different patterns of legitimate and legitimating actorship, assembled from global and local relations. Through an ecological conceptualisation the research identifies the problematisation and decomposition of actorship into contradictory assemblages of both traditional actors (teachers and politicians) and relatively new ones (NGOs). The relationship of the civil sector and the state structures allowed the emergence of new non-state, non-professional actors (NGOs) who aggregate their expertise from transnational data and legitimate both their position as experts and the particular educational change. This has consequences for non-experts as politicians and teachers. The transnational and European context penetrated into the Czech educational sphere not through an elite class of system actors but through the representatives of NGOs. Rhetorically saving education from degradation, NGOs engage in spreading the transnational data and externalise the legitimation of educational reform and thus become the bearers (although agentially limited) of the European space.

Keywords

Actorship, educational reform, legitimation ecology, transnational knowledge, expert knowledge, destatisation, expertise loss

Introduction

For almost two decades scholars have been inquiring into the new Europeanisation of education policies, focusing on new spaces and new actors. Although scholars have identified the idea of the knowledge economy as a major aspect of the new Europeanisation and transnational statistical

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comparative data as its main device (Lawn and Lingard, 2002), the actual channels of transnational knowledge transaction and relations to other kinds of knowledge need to be studied with regard to the rapid changes in the institution of education (Davies and Mehta, 2018). There are many studies on the influence of transnational knowledge in national or local contexts (Hultqvist et al., 2018; for the Central European context see Koucký and Černohorský, 1996; for the post-Soviet context see Silova, 2002; Silova and Niyozov, 2020). However, these studies focus on the path of transnational comparative data as one object, and not so often on its relations to other local knowledge and positions. This means that the focus on the relations among transnational knowledge, local agential patterns, the role of local knowledge, and the role of the state structures is rather neglected (Hartong and Piattoeva, 2019).

The current debate about actors participating in defining desirable education refers to many new and not very transparent actors (Ball, 2010a; Fumasoli et al., 2018; Robertson et al., 2012) and the very divergent requirements placed on more traditional ones, such as teachers (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016; Erss, 2018; Priestley et al., 2020; Robertson and Sorensen, 2018). We should not neglect the fact that every time new actors become involved, the roles and positions of the others involved re-change. Actorship in policy legitimating and influencing is characterised as multi-layered, while actors represent various roles and loyalties. For a decade researchers have observed that it is not useful to focus only on actorship within formal policy responsibilities (jurisdiction) to seek the sources of actorship in legitimating educational change (Ball, 2010b). The agency in legitimation is no longer self-evident; various sources are needed to stabilise an agential position in a given social ecology, especially the different kinds of knowledge (transnational, situational, 'expert'). It is the given ecology in which actorship is achieved (Biesta and Tedder, 2006) in different possible positions.

Contemporary literature links many ambiguities in actorship to the increasingly generalising context of the European space of the production, transfer, and evaluation of knowledge (Ball, 2010b; Carvalho, 2012; Fenwick et al., 2014; Lawn, 2011; Ozga, 2008). These studies revealed the decisive role of comparative and standardised knowledge usage in achieving agency (Grek and Ozga, 2010). Studies on statistical calculations in education policy indicate very clearly that transnational aggregated datasets are pushing out much of the local knowledge, whether that of teachers, parents, or local politicians, in defining their own problems and solutions (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016; Klees and Edwards Jr., 2016; Tveit and Lundahl, 2018). Thus it is important to study the different paths of knowledge-legitimacy dynamic that different European contexts undergo.

The statistical calculation of transnational data as a main feature of the new Europeanisation of education policy (Lawn, 2011) is entangled simultaneously in political, semantic, and social processes and creates a relatively new meaning of the expert in legitimating educational change (Gorur, 2015). Nevertheless, the rise of measuring expertise in the sense of statistics, comparativeness, and standardisation in managing education systems has been taking place since the beginning of the 20th century (Lawn, 2013). Therefore, the position of expertise conceived of as statistical comparative data has a longer history and touches on many other 'non-education' social policies (for example, health). Hacking (1991, 1992) and others (Porter, 1995) have shown how the collection of statistics created the bureaucratic machinery of the technology of power in a modern state and questioned statistics' self-portrait as apolitical, neutral, and objective descriptive information. In recent decades many studies have documented the performativity of statistics on the transnational level as well in construing the Europeanised space of education policy (Landri, 2018; Lawn, 2011). Nevertheless, what is important here is the consequences of this kind of knowledge for agential positions in the legitimation of reform. In her influential paper, Gorur (2015) demonstrated how politics intervene even in the epistemology of such statistical tools (OECD indicators), which are not merely tools any longer and are highly productive in the educational world. Further, such

data renders the position of science and scientists as measurement experts less important in such an educational world and shifts the expertise to non-scientific experts – the policymakers using these data. Therefore, it is possible to say that a particular type of knowledge mobilises a particular kind of expert and these are not necessarily its producers, as we will see in the empirical sections below.

The focus of this study is the Czech Republic; nevertheless, avoiding methodological nationalism and statism, it will describe the similarities and differences between European knowledge flows in achieving agency. In many respects, the Czech case illustrates the complicated way in which transnational knowledge influences agential structure because of the different positions of the state and the non-state domain in comparison with other European countries.

In this study I make use of relational sociology (Dépelteau, 2018), researching an ecology of agential patterns, relationally interconnected, within which the positions of diverse actors to participate (or not) in public debate over educational reform have stabilised. The reason is that many studies which focus on issues relating to knowledge – legitimation – agency are often designed as case studies of only one type of actor (e.g. only teachers, NGOs, consultants, or formal policymakers), or a case study of a group of actors (e.g. Global Partnership for Education). The focus on the relations among various agential positions, relationally patterned, within a given ecology is not sufficiently developed (Persson, 2018). It would be misleading to focus only on formal system actors and on one kind of knowledge. From this conceptualisation follow the research questions: (a) How were different positions for legitimating practice stabilised; by which knowledge, systems of reasoning, and relations to audiences? (b) How does the particular meaning of proper knowledge (transnational comparative knowledge, expertise, or 'comprehensive situational knowledge') intervene in stabilising these agential positions? (c) How were non-state structures mobilised by transnational data in a situation characterised by the increasing weakening of the state structures?

The paper answers the questions via an analysis of the discourse and materiality of a Czech case. It considers the extensive educational reform debate before the parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2017 and the ongoing debates before the appointment of a new Minister of Education in 2018, and includes various material and textual sources. The aim of this article is to demonstrate translation, interconnection, and diverse meaning and the use of knowledge in a national case which intervene in stabilising agential positions – patterned actorship in legitimating educational change. On the theoretical level, the paper contributes to the studies on actorship in legitimation of education by a specific decomposition of the notion of actorship/agential positions into various relationally interlinked instances. It allows us to understand actorship in the plural, in its many emerging patterns and interdependent forms. Thus, this paper provides a detailed elaboration of the social patterns of agential positions and the ambiguities among them. However local the case may be, it contributes to an understanding of contemporary changes in policy actorship and the way knowledge travels in interlinked legitimation ecologies in Europe.

The Czech case in the European context – different paths of transnational knowledge flows

Decentralised education reforms based on transnational comparisons have been taking place in the Czech environment since 2004, with several similar results to those observed in other Western countries (Hartong, 2018; Robinson, 2015), such as the emergence of many new 'non-educational' actors and a loss of professionalism and expertise from formal organisations. However, the Czech environment has its specific features, as a result of which it can be assumed that the dynamics and impacts of the spread of transnational knowledge will be different from those described in other studies, especially those from the Anglo-Saxon environment (Hartong and Piattoeva, 2019; Piattoeva et al., 2018). In order to understand the position of the legitimation of Czech educational

policy, it is necessary to take into account the legacy of the Communist regime before 1989 and its impact on trust in the state. It would be misleading to perceive the changes in the area of Central and Eastern Europe only as catching up with the developments in the West (Silova, 2002).

The Czech state structures have principally been weakened on the ideational level, as the state was perceived as a repository of totalitarian force, which is documented in post-Communist countries generally (Lavalette and Ferguson, 2007: 450; Meyer and Boyd, 2001: 1, 3). Mistrust of the state had various consequences for the position of civil society and the state structures in the legitimation of educational change and reform. While many scholars describe the situation of the fragmentation of political initiatives as resulting from the intended political project of the central government in the field of education (Kauko et al., 2018), in the Czech context the picture of a chaotic and thoughtless education system is due to insufficient capacity and the overall inefficiency of the state (Dvořák et al., 2014). While Western civil structures criticise the state as being too neoliberal (Wilkins, 2012), in the Czech context these civil structures rather criticise the state as ineffective and lacking managerial leadership, outcome standards, and evidence-based policies (Wirthová, 2019). Education is among the items on the agenda with the least state investment, political battles over education are rare, and the main bearer of this agenda is the civil sector, with many NGOs trying to 'save and rescue' education from degradation and chaos (EDUin, 2018).

The dynamic of the influence of European transnational data traveling in the legitimation of policy is rather specific within the Czech context. In the 1990s, a relatively strong interchange between OECD experts and Czech authorities planning educational reform before joining the European Union in 2004 was followed by a process of increasing weakening of state structures and a decrease in the influence of this data in legitimating and planning education. A good illustration is the state-funded publishing of a translation of OECD reports, which started with an extensive volume using this data and accompanied by an original study worked out by Czech researchers, followed by reports that were more and more limited, and ending with a short overview published on the Ministry website by an ordinary official in 2016.

This situation has motivated the selection of the case. The Czech pre-election period in 2017 was a rather unusual period with regard to debates about education, because it was the first time since the general curricular reform in 2004 that such an extensive public debate about education had taken place. On the one hand, the main topic of these discussions respected the trajectory of a specific Czech debate about education – the issue of the urgent need to revise the elementary school curricula – as the 2004 reform was generally deemed to have been unsuccessful (Štech, 2013). On the other hand, the newly opened space of legitimation attracted new actors and kinds of knowledge which, up to that time, had been used occasionally in general public debates, mainly transnational comparisons. This opened a channel through which transnational data exercised its influence, however, mainly through non-state actors who then become its main translators into the Czech context. Many traditional but also relatively new actors (politicians, inter-ministerial working groups, industry and employers' representatives, teachers' unions, NGOs, and public figures) tried to take part in these debates and to promote their own educational claims, which took the form of very divergent desired curriculum content, such as inclusive education, lifelong learning, multicultural education, education for national pride, civil defence education, financial literacy, manual work and gardening education, and many others.

Although the topic followed on from the specific history of Czech educational reform (Porubský and Pešková, 2018), the general pre-election public educational debates were triggered significantly by the publication of comparative data displaying that the Czech Republic invested the lowest share of GDP into basic and secondary education, and teachers' salaries were the lowest when compared with all the OECD countries (OECD, 2016). This also raised the issue of teachers' roles in defining desirable education. Being an example of what is elaborated as the dynamics of

scandalisation or shock (Carvalho, 2012; Nordin, 2018; Pons, 2012), this data also legitimated not only the organisation of the public debate itself, but also several parliamentary initiatives, specific governmental budget packages, and other steps. In many media interviews, politicians were confronted directly with the OECD graphs and asked to remedy the situation (e.g. ČT24, 2017a). However, it must be stressed that the situation was far from the realisation of an 'evidence-based' policy decision. On the contrary, the governmental measures were enforced to a significant degree by criticism from NGOs, which seemed to possess the most extensive overview of these datasets and demanded evidence-based policymaking, which was lacking. In an extended temporal focus on the Czech context, these are the NGOs which criticise the government for lacking rationality, management, and logically linked measures, for ad hoc and chaotic decisions, and so forth (SKAV et al., 2010). As we will see further, governmental actors, especially organisations authorised directly by policymaking in education (the National Institute for Education), lacked a position in these debates as actors. In that sense their presence in these debates was minor.

However, the consensus over need for reform was apparent only on the surface of the debates in the period. Because of the very different systems of reasoning underlying legitimation on the side of politicians, NGOs, and associations' representatives, greater confusion and tensions opened up, which led to the very problematic nature of the formation of the positions of the actors involved. From the sociological point of view, the research question relates to the form of actorship and how agency is achieved (Biesta et al., 2017). In the following passages, I provide conceptualisation, description of empirical material, and research method

The educational legitimation ecology – actors and knowledge within relations

To answer the research questions, I have pursued the perspective of relational sociology (Abbott, 2016; Biesta and Tedder, 2006; Decuypere and Simons, 2016; Dépelteau, 2018; Emirbayer, 1997), together with developments of non-self-evident actorship, particularly Boltanski's model of *critical action* (Boltanski, 2011). This conceptual interlinkage, embedded in a broader 'ecological' strand (Biesta and Tedder, 2006), is able to consider the actor as a non-essentialist category (for an exhaustive systematisation of many sources and approaches of the relational sociology, see Vandenberghe, 2018). Therefore, I do not consider the notions of actor, competence, and qualification in a formal legal way as administrative competences, legal responsibilities, or professional qualifications (Boltanski, 2011: 69). Such a conceptualisation very often narrows many possible social actions and processes which influence the forming of position for legitimating an educational claim.

In his linked ecologies, Andrew Abbott suggests that 'it is the process of constructing the relations between actors and locations that in fact constitutes and delimits both actors and locations' (Abbott, 2016: 39). He called these interlinkages and specific arrangements of actors and other instances a *ligation*. Similarly, Boltanski intends to cover the materiality of such ligations: 'construction of assemblies of objects, arrangements that hold together, the fitness of which can be demonstrated' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000: 212–213). Therefore the ecology of educational legitimation is analytically constituted by public situations and events involving practices of 'making sense' of the qualifications and disqualifications (Popkewitz, 2000) of appropriate actors, knowledge, ligations, and tasks (Abbott, 2016: 39).

These notions (in italics in the text below) refer to non-self-evident actorship, which does not precede the event. The competence of anyone to be an actor does not lie in his/her transcendental subjectivity, but in social settings – in the affirmation that he/she can be an actor. However, these affirmations are not embedded in a solid social structure, but rather in concatenations of events and

in the discursive and material arrangements of situations (Abbott, 2016: 40, 45, 73–74; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000: 209).

To be an *actor*, nonetheless, is not enough. To be able to provide an argument publicly, to speak for or against a claim, in the terms of being a critical actor, one needs to possess a *qualification* which is accessible in the agora where one is allowed by means of different forms of qualification to be present in the position of an addressor (Boltanski, 2011: 69). This qualification involves both material and semantic forms. Other actors (without a qualification) are allowed to be present in the debate as well, but they find themselves in the position of the *audience*. If they want to speak, they become *qualification-value candidates* – a voice which cannot yet confirm or disconfirm or argue for or against (Hacking, 2004), a candidate to whom it may one day become appropriate to listen. It means that through the process of qualifying operations in the public space there also take place *neutralisations* that make any critical action – an action that qualifies as part of the reform debate – impossible. These neutralisations take part precisely in the process of arranging *situations* in which some actors or objects are present, but not visible, or are subsumed under a particular category, so that in the end they are within a category which does not allow them to act. They are left in the ambivalent situation of a qualification-value candidate, either as a mere audience or a relatively less important actor with a weaker voice and ability to act. This non-stabilised nature of actorship is the backdrop against which many public representations try to create legitimacy for particular actors and claims (Lindberg and Knutsson, 2019).

Affirming that critical action or justifying, legitimating action is not self-evident raises an important question related to the public nature of such situations. For Boltanski, the notion of the *public* is crucial in setting the situation for critical action (Boltanski, 2011: 69). Individual, private criticism, which is not connected to common notions of what is just, appropriate, and good, is not a critical action in a sociological sense of legitimation (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999). Such a public situation stems from specific public disruption of affairs that were taken for granted, which involves a kind of reflexive move (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999). This reflexive move can be triggered by any public scandal or shock, whether it is a transnational comparison or some other matter. The problem in the realm of education is that in contemporary European societies, the external comparative way of triggering public indignation is becoming prevalent (Tveit and Lundahl, 2018).

Therefore, it is appropriate to tackle the ambiguous phenomena of position and action with an analysis of the arrangements (material and discursive) of instances in situations where practices of 'making reasonability' of educational reform take place – situations of the legitimation of educational claims. These situations form the *educational legitimation ecology*, from which follows the aim of the study, which is to understand the ways in which actorship was established in the Czech pre-election educational legitimation ecology, with the public debates and public documents as its empirical sites.

Empirical material and method – relational analytical work

There were several significant organisations that ran the main educational debates, but the main organisers were NGOs. The oldest one is SKAV (Permanent Conference of Associations in Education), founded in 2003; a younger one is EDUin (founded in 2010), and they are interconnected both personally and through their infrastructure. Together, they organise what are termed round tables (RT) devoted to various educational issues. In the period covered by this study, they prepared 10 RTs with various panellists, one with politicians only, and one with teachers' representatives only. Student NGOs took part in organising public debate too: the Czech High School Students' Union (ČSU) held the first public educational debate with politicians in that period, with

the personal cooperation of EDUin (as the moderator). This debate, called 'Education vs. Politics', also established the discourse of the contrast between politics and education, which prevailed in many other events (BLESK, 2017; ČSU, 2017; SKAV and EDUin, 2017). A student NGO dedicated to the preparation of future teachers Otevřeno! (Opened!) organised an 'Education Night' (annually from 2016) with many workshops, discussions, and lectures (Otevřeno, 2017). Additionally, more traditional actors, such as the Faculty of Education of Charles University (PedF UK, 2017), the Czech Chamber of Deputies (PSP ČR, 2017), and the Employers' Union (UZS, 2017), held several public debates or conferences, although they were not so numerous.

I have chosen the events which enabled the tracing of various formations of the position to enforce educational claims publicly. The data collection covers all the public events (the period from the end of 2016 to January 2018) about education on the general national level, while local and individual debating was not included: public debates (14 in total, 10 video records); interviews and discussions devoted to education on the general level broadcast on TV (private and public) with nationwide coverage (six in total); selected press releases regarding the main events described above (four in total); educational policy documents intended for various audiences (politicians, the general public) (seven in total) published by the main actors present during the period covered by the study: NGOs (three in total), governmental organisations charged with acting (three in total), and an academic research centre (one in total); texts from social media events and (or) web invitations set together with the main public events (17 in total), and observation notes taken at many events (10 in total). Taken together, there were 31 events and 58 items to analyse. In this way, I manage to capture different ways of forming positions together with the actors' framings of their own role and that of others. For collecting the data, I made use of Newton Media Archive via Charles University licence, public media resources, and research observation.

I have used a qualitative analysis based on post-foundational and relational ontology (Macgilchrist, 2016), which employs categories in a non-essential manner (Knutsson and Lindberg, 2017); categories do not determine the content in advance, on the contrary, the particular content is a research question. This relational methodological perspective is not primarily concerned with texts but primarily tracks the relations within a situation (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000) and is first and foremost attentive to systems and patterns of references and 'indexicality' of language, which configure social shapes which are highly consequential for social action (Fontdevila and White, 2013; Prior, 2003: 11–23). Specifically, I have traced the references to the normative content of 'should be' in education; this means legitimating practices and strategies in both their material and semantic dimensions in order to capture the formation and colliding of agential positions – different patterns of actorship. The basic analytical unit was a public expression of a demand for a change in education with regard to the justification of the type of actor, audience, knowledge, and relevance. I have traced the relations among the practices of occupying these categories to identify an actor's position, together with the consequences for possibilities for actors' action.

I coded the data in several iterative steps (Saldana, 2009). First, structural coding with non-essentialist categories was employed and led to the division of several analytical layers: the competence of an actor, audience, reasonability (knowledge), relevance (problems to solve, solutions to problems). Then I applied versus codes to each of these levels by the sub-code of 'neutralisation'. All the layers were gradually divided into 'actor-action' subcategories through taxonomic coding in order to uncover 'who can do what and how'. Subsequently, a patterned content emerged and the identification of agential position was divided into 'qualification to be present at a public debate', 'responsibility for outcomes and action', and 'competence for an agenda and a problem being solved'. I suggest these three analytical dimensions as points of interpretation of the findings introduced below; these are the results of the analysis, together with the literature study, as they came to the fore as borders that made visible both the

advantageous and the disadvantageous relations among the actors. Theming the data and pattern coding indicated the meaning of the differences, which made it possible to detect particular patterns of actorship and contradiction among them. The analysis was processed via CAQDA.

In the following section, reporting the main findings, I provide an elaboration of the social patterns of three agential positions and the ambiguities among them. First, I will focus on material formation of an actor's competence to be part of the education reform debate. Second, I will demonstrate constraints and possibilities for action of politicians', teachers', and NGOs' agential positions.

Who can debate? Materiality and knowledge

The process of building and maintaining or neutralising the competence takes place on one level in different material choices made on the basis of different knowledge systems. It is obvious that in the case of public debates devoted to education, only some people were invited by the debate organisers. What is more important is that for the organisers the key, the criterion for making choices like this, was different kinds of knowledge. In all the cases of debates with politicians it was pre-election survey data (BLESK, 2017; ČSU, 2017; SKAV and EDUin, 2017). In the case of the discussion about teachers, the key fact was being a representative who was knowledgeable about teachers' complex and hard situation, which serves as a marker of being an expert on teachers (SKAV and EDUin, 2018). In all the public debates invited individuals acknowledged as actors became, according to these knowledges, either panellists, less important semi-panellists, or part of the audience.

The material dimensions of the arrangements of these debates were very important for forming the actor's ability to act. In every debate with politicians, the panellists (with the highest score in the pre-election survey) sat on chairs placed on the upper stage, and semi-panellists (with the lowest score needed for entrance to the Chamber) were placed underneath, in the front row of the audience (ČSU, 2017), or stood at the edge of the panel (BLESK, 2017; SKAV and EDUin, 2017). The schedule of the interactions was also arranged according to these qualifications – each panellist had a head microphone, while the semi-panellists had one shared hand-held microphone. The panellists were allowed to voice their 'ideas' for a predetermined length of time, while the semi-panellists were allowed to 'react' after them in a few sentences. Thus, the formal qualifications of both types of actors (panellists and semi-panellists) were the same (politicians), but their qualification to be a partner in the debate relied on the quantitative comparative data, not on formal responsibility.

> Mr [xxx], thank you for your question. Pre-election surveys served as a key in the selection of parties. We invited the parties with the highest preferences directly to the panel of the debate, while the parties whose surveys predict lower success but still have something to say about education from our point of view are invited to the front row, where they will be introduced as participants in the debate and involved in the moments when it will be relevant. [xxx], 1st Vice-Chairman (ČSU, 2017: Facebook answer)

In the only debate with (about) teachers – 'How should teachers be involved in formulating education policy?' (SKAV and EDUin, 2018) – the material and temporal arrangements represented many ambiguities of teachers' competence to be part of the public debate. This debate was organised by SKAV and EDUin, whose 'round tables' usually attract high attendances, but in this particular case, the turnout was meagre. This debate took place at 2 p.m. on a regular working day, which prevented many teachers from being physically part of the discussion. The invited panellists were not teachers only through the merit of being a teacher. That was not a sufficient condition.

Additional characteristics were needed in order to receive an invitation. Teachers (if there were any) were in the position of being members of the audience.

> We are experiencing a kind of crisis of representation. I am already a professional, but the ordinary teachers are basically our members, but they are ordinary teachers, yes. (SKAV and EDUin, 2018: a teachers' representative)

The panellists were from different types of competing teachers' unions and associations, trying to represent teachers' voices in the public and policy domains. The panel was composed of the president of the traditional *Czech and Moravian Trade Union of Workers in Education*, the chairman of the newly established *Association of Teachers of Civic Education and Social Sciences*, the vice-president of the *Chamber of Pedagogues*, and the chairwoman of *Teachers' Platform*. The latter two organisations were established in 2017 through the dispute over the new Ministry document *Teachers' Career Framework*. It was the Chamber of Pedagogues who organised a petition against this document, with over 22,000 teachers' signatures, which led afterwards to the cancellation of the Ministry initiative. The consequences of this petition for the formation of teachers' competence will be discussed in more detail below.

In the debate, all four organisations' representatives were called upon to present the main aims of their organisations and their main activities in acting as 'voices' for teachers. Although their main activities, as stated, were organising different kinds of 'fora' for teachers to debate their teaching problems and opinions on policy (petitions and social media questionnaires), the representatives still disqualified the teachers by framing the lack of engagement as teachers' own decision:

> We will not lie to ourselves that teachers are active. (SKAV and EDUin, 2018: a teachers' representative)

> So, our effort is to bring together active teachers who care about that communication, because it is, of course, straightforward and fair to say that a lot of teachers don't care about that communication. Build on the former and continue. (SKAV and EDUin, 2018: a teachers' representative)

Moreover, although the representatives endeavoured to establish their authority to represent the teachers by 'understanding their hard work' and their problems, and by possessing 'knowledge about teachers' complex situation', it was mainly the lack of such knowledge (according to the representatives) which prevented teachers from being part of the policy debate. This 'hard situation' prevented ordinary teachers, according to their representatives, from understanding it.

In such a meaning, a representative was more knowledgeable, not necessarily about a particular teaching problem (this was an inviolable teacher competence) but about a complex situation. The reasonable knowledge needed for a teacher to act as part of the public debate about teachers does not reside in teaching knowledge. Because of the implicit consideration about the appropriate type of knowledge, it was reasonable to invite teachers' representatives, not teachers themselves, to discuss teachers' agendas. Knowledge considerations have material consequences, together with possibilities for action. This debate was temporarily and materially arranged, together with the kind of reasonable knowledge used, in such a way that the implicit answer to the question in the title of this debate was: 'In no way.'

On that account, becoming a panellist in the public debates was the significant qualification process through which different kinds of knowledge (pre-election surveys, comprehensive knowledge of teachers' complex situation) was decisive for taking part in an educational debate – not the formal responsibilities. These observations correspond with many studies

devoted to expert knowledge in policymaking, which focus on the specific process of becoming an expert through public presence (for a general view see Turner, 2015; for a specific Czech case see Štech, 2019). In other words, it is a process in which the knowledge used, in a particular system of reason, has real consequences for possibilities of action (Popkewitz, 2000). Nevertheless, the category of qualification for public justification or criticism was not directly connected with the category of competence for agenda. As we will see in the following sections, responsibility, competence, and qualification were assembled and combined differently with different actors.

The patterns of educational reform actors – politicians, teachers, and NGOs

In the settings described above, only certain types of action are possible. But the competence and qualification to be part of the debate are not embedded exclusively in the public debates themselves. Rather, they are part of a broader space of semantics which is also shaped by other legitimating events, practices, and strategies. Producing strategic educational policy documents, press releases, and social media events is a crucial practice in the production of constraints and possibilities. In this textual data, as well as in the materiality of public debates, competence in the cases of politicians, teachers, and NGOs was built in a somewhat contradictory way. The research uncovers the difference between responsibility for the outcomes, competence to be an actor in the agenda, and being qualified to be part of the public debate. These categories (responsibility, competence, and qualification) were not synonyms and were not necessarily allies. The research reveals many tensions between *responsibility – competence – qualification* in participating in educational reform.

Responsible, qualified, but non-competent politicians

Politicians were generally deemed very important actors, worthy of being addressed, invited to public debates, and asked for answers. Because of the fact that they were predominantly in the position of panellists, they were acknowledged as being qualified to voice justification or criticism of educational reform publicly. Their voices were validated as being qualified both materially and within the discourse. On the other hand, politicians' competence to be actors in the agenda – to be competent with regard to the problem being solved – did not automatically go together with their public qualification. Rather, the politicians themselves, as well as the debate organisers who invited them, 'neutralised' or limited their competence.

An illustration of this mismatch of qualification and competence was provided by the framing of a debate organised by a Czech NGO devoted to promoting progressive changes in secondary education. This debate was called 'Politics vs. Education' and the panel was formed of invited politicians according to the criterion of the pre-election vote survey, with the material arrangements mentioned above. To interpret the framing of the Facebook and web invitations, it was the politicians who had to prove that there was no opposition between politics and education, and that they were serious about education.

> How do political parties want to reflect this reality after the elections to the Chamber of Deputies? Is education again just a proclaimed pre-election priority, or do we pay the salaries of the teachers with dignity according to the importance of their role? What is the substance of truly quality education? Will the newly-elected politicians only act as brakes on schooling and education again? Or will we, in the Czech Republic, move further? (ČSU, 2017: web and Facebook invitation).

In this text we see that it is reasonable to address the politicians; they are responsible. But simultaneously it is not reasonable to address them; they do not reflect the reality; they are not competent – it may be that the politicians are the brakes! Why did the NGO invite the politicians to the debate while simultaneously disqualifying them? Such a paradoxical assembling of categories of (in-)competence and qualification and responsibility was present in many debates with invited politicians. In that sense their competence in the agenda was neutralised – negatively fixed to their responsibility.

On the other hand, politicians often disqualified themselves as well. In many cases, it is possible to see that politicians define their competence in contrast to their political profession: 'I as a parent. . .'; 'in my judgement as a lawyer and legislator, I must say' (ČT24, 2017b).

> I'm in a slightly different role here because, unlike my colleagues, I'm not a Member of Parliament. So I can look at it from the point of view of the principal of a grammar school, so I do not fully understand my colleague, that she did not have finance for lighting; it is a matter of the organising body of a particular school and not the Ministry. (ČSU, 2017: a politician, panellist)

Such references to other, non-actual-role competences were not present in other actors, for example representatives of NGOs; they did not make references to other competences than to their expert position. And teachers' representatives did not advertise themselves as not being teachers but parents, lawyers, or school directors.

It seems to be competence defined as non-competence: competence to present that one's competence is limited – and so one cannot do everything one should, or that is needed. For example, as a former Minister of Education commented on resistance to the idea of inclusive education: 'there are other interest groups and they can formulate it more convincingly' (ČT24, 2017a). Such (self-) neutralisation of competence points to a broader issue: the problematisation of the state and non-state divide in the production of expertise, which will be discussed later. It may also be interpreted simply as 'evading responsibility'. However, considering the relational approach here, such problematisation of responsibility is not a moral issue of individuals; it is an issue of patterns of references, practices, and operations, which are created through social processes.

Responsible but not qualified teachers

A very different assemblage of actorship was present in the case of teachers (considered mainly as K12 teachers in the debates). On the one hand, they were presented as an important factor and therefore needed to be carefully monitored: 'There has to be a clear criterion for teachers' quality' (DVTV, 2018).

> Well, that's, that's just an absolutely crucial thing. The crucial and unquestionable thing is that we want teachers to be of good quality. And, of course, monitoring their quality is something that is extremely important [. . .]. (ČT24, 2017b: a politician)

These ambiguous justifications of teachers' importance are well described, e.g. in a special issue on how teachers matter (Alvunger et al., 2017; Biesta, 2017). Indeed, in the document called 'Audit' produced annually by EDUin, the demand to raise teachers' salaries was balanced by 'pressure on the quality' of teachers and the outcomes of teaching. One point concerning the defined weaknesses of Czech education was the 'absence of systemic quality management of teachers and school principals [and] poor support for directors, especially in the field of pedagogical management' (EDUin, 2016: 7). Governmental policy documents framed the quality of teaching for clients of the educational system similarly (ČŠI, 2017; NÚV, 2017). However, quality teaching was not linked to the teachers as being necessary actors in educational debates and policy.

On the other hand, teachers' qualification for participating in public debates was paradoxically problematised by excusing them. While the competence was attached only to teaching, not to being an actor in the agenda – being competent in the problem being solved – it was justified by their 'hard work', which prevented them from being a fully proper participant in the debate. Other actors did not consider the teachers to be experts on policymaking and experts on teachers. Teachers were necessary to a degree – as the audience, as a workforce to be cared for and regulated – but not as expert individuals. It was agreed that they were competent to teach, and responsible for the outcomes of teaching, but, because it is 'hard work' and 'they are tired' (ČT24, 2017a; EDUin, 2017; UZS, 2017), they cannot be a partner in debates over educational policy.

> Teachers can't handle everything. On the basis of proven quality, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports should recommend to schools programmes, projects, and activities that can support civic education, and thus make the work easier for teachers (EDUin, 2016: 25).

> Teachers and principals are tired, overburdened with administration, and unpaid (EDUin, 2017: 2).

> In other words, I fully understand this and say to myself that working in these conditions for teachers is actually not an easy task at all in public, municipal, regional, and county schools (ČT24, 2017a: 3).

Their competence as teachers neutralises their relevance to the reform debate and the reasonableness of their claims or actions. In that sense, they were not addressors in utterances about educational change (Lyotard, 1988). The words of a former Minister of Education, when talking about teachers' petition against the document *Teachers' Career Framework*, are illustrative. It was his apologetic reaction to his previous impetuous statement that teachers 'are illiterates':

> So, I've said it a few times, if . . . I was in a situation where I have to constantly see what I have to change in my job or what must be somehow submitted in some way to present or report, and then somebody comes and says to me, 'Here is something that will mean only paperwork, a burden.' And he comes to me before the end of the school year, when I am mainly dealing with how to test some pupils, how to talk with some parents, how to prepare the end of the year. And if I look at those, don't know, this petition, which is short and relatively satisfactory, I would probably sign it too . . . that it is a great shame that at the last minute such an action actually breaks down or disrupts the work that has also been carried out with the great participation of teachers and directors. (ČT24, 2017a: 3)

Teachers did not manage to be proper policy actors when signing a petition against a prepared policy document.

What was missing entirely in comparison with the competence of politicians was the teachers' own voices – there was no track of teachers alone, as teachers without other distinguishing markers (as an expert, a politician, or a representative of a teachers' association). Not only were they not physically present among the panellists in the debates under research, but in many cases, teachers were simply overlooked, and no particular justification for omitting them was explicitly present. In the case of strategic documents, both governmental and those produced by NGOs, they were usually in the last position in the lists of important actors for participation in discussions and policymaking.

> Recommendations:
> - Efforts to create action plans with the awareness that the education system must respond to societal change.
> - Greater attention from the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports to the way in which action plans are created, pointing to examples of inspiring practice.
> - The involvement of actors not only from schools, but also from non-formal education, parents, businesses, and the civic sector.
> - Promoting the link between local and regional action plans. (EDUin, 2016: 21)

It seems that Czech teachers are trapped in a circle of cultural causation: a good teacher cannot have the energy and time to acquire comprehensive knowledge about his/her complicated situation and therefore cannot be a good policy actor. Teachers are less important legitimating actors (audience) just because they are teachers who do not possess the proper complex knowledge.

Qualified, competent, non-responsible NGOs

The actorship regarding the representatives of NGOs was also distinctive. Since they were the main organisers of public debates about education in the pre-election period (11 debates out of the total of 14) and their representatives were also mediators or moderators of these debates (ČSU, 2017), they entered the interactions in a decisive way.

Regarding the channels of influence of transnational knowledge in the contemporary European context (Carvalho, 2012; Fenwick et al., 2014; Seddon, 2014b), these were mainly the two NGOs involved in pre-election debates (SKAV, EDUin), which were translators of this type of expert knowledge into the Czech context. They have built their competence on the fact that they possess expert knowledge (in their words, contrary to politicians and teachers) such as the newest data of transnational organisations (*Education at a Glance*, PISA results), data from expert groups (semi-academic Czech research centres), and the opinions of other experts (Czech and foreign) (EDUin, 2016, 2017, 2018). In the period, EDUin published three strategic documents in which it justified its own expertise by being able to understand the situation (reality) thanks to its possession of expert knowledge. A part of one of these influential documents, *Audit 2017*, reads thus:

> To limit unpredictability is possible if we can best assess the current state of the education system, evaluate the importance and impact of the processes that are under way, and point out those phenomena that deserve increased attention, the problems that need to be addressed first, and the challenges with which we need to cope. The annual audit of the education system in the Czech Republic has the ambition to provide such an insight in a form that respects expert judgement and is also understandable to the media and the general public. By describing the strengths and weaknesses of the education system and the opportunities and risks, the audit attempts to capture the current state of affairs. (EDUin, 2018: 1)

In this account, the rights to be part of the debate, to organise debates, and to ask the responsible actors questions go together. The NGO experts had the qualifications to justify or criticise a proposed reform publicly: ‘In the following expert report, we describe the current state and design possible solutions’ (EDUin, 2016: 1). On the other hand, they were struggling with the fact that although they were listened to, they were not allowed to realise their expert knowledge (put their expert knowledge into practice). The strategic document titled *Problems of Czech Education and Suggestions for its Solution 2017* states:

> Our story: we are people who firmly believe that education is a fundamental value of society, and therefore we strive to preserve healthy principles in our education system, and we also strive for effective changes in the current system: we are the initiative EDUCATION PRE-EMINENTLY and we are ready to help toward systematic changes with our professional expertise. (EDUin, 2017: 7)

They were not responsible for the outcomes of the policy reform, although they wished to change it. They were ‘ready to help’. The more dissatisfied they were with the results, the more they built their competence on knowing reality, reinforced by data expressing reality (‘our professional expertise’).

> We want the education policies developed by the Minister of Education to be based on real data and research that will ensure its progressive development. [. . .] In terms of the popularity of schools with children, we are at the bottom of international comparisons, along with drill-focused South Korea. According to surveys, the parents of children are rather satisfied with the form of education. Where did the mistake happen and how can we fix it? The world in the 21st century is changing at a dizzying rate. The labour market will look completely different in 20 years than it does today. 50% of today's professions will disappear and be replaced by others, the form of which is difficult to predict. How will schools face this trend? Only 58% of high school students believe in democracy 27 years after the Velvet Revolution. The average term of office of the Minister of Education is 1.5 years. There is talk of the complete absence of a long-term conception of development. While we are talking about *education*, do we not miss the very essence of *education* between our fingers? (ČSU, 2017: web invitation)

By referring to, and displaying, the comparative transnational data these NGOs established their competence contrary to the competence of politicians. The source of 'delegitimating the role of national politicians' (Nordin, 2018) was not the OECD representatives, but rather the local actors attached to the transnational data, for whom the reality and the data were the same thing.

Although they were acknowledged as competent with regard to the agenda and problems being solved, they were still not allowed to act directly in the realisation of policy, except for some cases where they were present as formal advisers. The competence of being an expert on a particular educational reality did not immediately go together with the possibility of acting on that particular known educational reality. In that sense, this situation established separation of the *knowledge of* from the direct *acting on*, and indicates the new roles within the process of intensifying tensions between centralised and decentralised levels of governance (Piattoeva et al., 2018), the roles of translating, mediating, and brokering (Fenwick et al., 2014: 5).

Discussion: the Czech educational legitimisation ecology and the role of the European context

The aim of this article was to demonstrate the translation, interconnection, and diverse meaning and the use of knowledge which intervenes in stabilising agential positions – patterned actorship in legitimating educational change. I have posed three questions. First, how were different positions for legitimating practice stabilised, and by which knowledge, systems of reasoning, and relations to audiences?

The above analysis of the pre-election period suggests that internally ambiguous assemblages of actorship do not stand alone. They are interlinked and are stabilised with the relation of one to another and to a particular meaning of proper knowledge. The paper demonstrated that the agential position – a particular pattern of actorship – is not defined only in positive terms; the legitimation of position is also based on elements which are missing. The elimination or neutralisation of some instances (audience, relevance) is constitutive for other positions and it heavily depends on the knowledge meaning, aggregation, and use. In this, we can see the important relational aspect of actorship in legitimating educational change, while the type of knowledge and the way it is used have both material and agential consequences. A kind of knowledge mobilises particular actors, and actors engage in it.

On the one hand, the specific non-qualification of teachers was a condition of the qualification of the representatives. The qualification of the representatives was enabled and confirmed by the situation in which teachers were not confirmed as qualified actors for public judgement of policy-making, although they were referred to as being important factors of policy. Moreover, without claiming and presenting the possession of comprehensive knowledge (which teachers lack), the

representatives could not be partners to other qualified actors such as NGOs and politicians. Such an interrelation points in one respect to the contemporary ambiguous process of teachers' professionalisation (Robertson and Sorensen, 2018). As described above, many objections posed by NGOs and others see teacher agency as a weakness within the operation of the system and seek to replace it with evidence-based and data-driven approaches. Hereby, the Czech case does not point to much in the way of the return of teachers' agency as an important dimension of teachers' professionalism (Biesta et al., 2015).

The paper demonstrates a new trend in the weakening of teachers' position. From the very beginning of thinking about educational reform in the 1990s, the idea was that the role of the teacher is an autonomous actor in curriculum-making, similarly to that in other European curricular reforms in the same period (Priestley et al., 2020). However, the general dissatisfaction and disappointment at the weakness of the process of implementation and poor support of schools created a space for the retreat of the agency of teachers and entrance of other actors – experts on education (not necessarily educational experts). The introduction of expert knowledge in the sense of non-local, objective, fast, clear, and comparative transnational data reduced the legitimacy of professional knowledge (that of teachers). In the present case, it is demonstrated in a kind of *de-expertisation* of teachers in terms of knowledge important for policy formulation. The role of the meaning of the expertise was decisive for teachers' agency since the knowledge of teachers was not confirmed in the ecology as expert. This de-expertisation indicates the creation of boundaries between categories as teacher, expert, and professional (Seddon, 2014a), which could create various disadvantegous positions.

On the other hand, politicians, although situated as qualified, but non-competent, went together with their competent reality-knower – the NGOs. The competence for an agenda and problems being solved, the expert competence of NGOs, stems from the disunity and fragmentation of governmental policymaking as illustrated by the absence of national organisations' voice in the debates. The demands for evidence-based and expert policy decisions came more from the side of the NGOs than from the governmental organisations. Without non-competent politicians, the NGOs would not have built their public qualification as reality-knowers, but without responsible politicians and teachers, they would not have had any reason to address them. In the period described, the Czech politicians, as formal representatives of governmental activities, were not neutralised in their competence in agenda by transnational knowledge directly, but by the non-affirmation of NGOs and by themselves as well, both of which non-affirmations were made possible by the meaning of the expert knowledge.

This leads us to the second question: how does the particular meaning of proper knowledge (transnational comparative knowledge, expertise, or 'comprehensive situational knowledge') intervene in stabilising these agential positions? The transnational and European context travels into the Czech educational context via a transnational comparative kind of knowledge, through actors who legitimate a particular educational reform externally (Tveit and Lundahl, 2018) and simultaneously legitimate their position as key policy actors – as reality-knowers. Calculative rationality, as founded and maintained by educational experts (Lawn, 2018), or by measurement experts (Gorur, 2015), which enabled the process of Europeanisation in education, is traveling into the Czech context via the self-legitimation of non-state actors. It means that the agential position of the producers of such knowledge is less important in this context than their role as knowledge 'aggregators' in the legitimation of policy in education. My argument here is that this triple process of stabilising (legitimating) a problem, a solution, and positions creates an educational legitimation ecology that is neither purely local nor purely transnational.

Transnational data influences not only policy practice but the agentic positions of those who legitimate their own position by this knowledge. In other words, this knowledge creates both

positions and discourse – relationally both. Therefore, the main agents of the European knowledge economy in the period of justifying educational reform were not an elite class of system actors: 'national and regional politicians and system administrators, people having responsibility for aspects of the educational system' (Lawn and Lingard, 2002: 294). They were the representatives of NGOs who legitimated their own position by expert knowledge and were the main bearers and translators of this knowledge into the Czech context. By rhetorically saving and rescuing education from degradation and chaos, the NGOs engaged in spreading the transnational data and externalised the legitimation of educational reform and thus become the bearers, although agentially limited, of the European space in the Czech environment.

The relationship of NGOs and formal organisational structures indicates the answer to the third research question, how non-state structures were mobilised by transnational data, in a situation characterised by the increasing weakening of the state structures. Historically, from the above context descriptions and empirical findings, we can observe a development in the positions of local and transnational knowledge in the legitimation of policy. The institutionalised disappointment of the functioning of the state in the 1990s weakened the role of the state and local and professional expertise, and around 2010 allowed the emergence of new non-state, non-professional experts who aggregate their expertise from transnational data and legitimate both their position as experts and the particular educational change. The relations between the agential patterns of politicians and NGOs are linked to what is described as the 'destatisation of politics' (Ball, 2010a; Jessop, 2016). Destatisation, as a process of 'redrawing boundaries between state and non-state apparatuses and activities', in which many issues are removed from the purview of a state (Jessop, 2016: 203), is apparent here. This has consequences for the flow of transnational data, as it was not system actors as 'significant managers, officials, and politicians who were the main carriers of Europeanisation', as described by, for example, Lawn and Lingard (2002). Thus it was not the state structures that engaged in transnational data, as, for example, was described in Scotland (Lingard and Sellar, 2014). The NGO representative 'circulated explicit language of comparison, evaluation, new generic skills, and learning' (Lawn and Lingard, 2002: 304).

The research outcomes point to trends towards the contemporary problematisation of actorship in the broader changes of the relationship between the state, non-state actors, and types of knowledge in legitimating educational change in broader global and European transformation processes. The Czech legitimation processes, as we have seen, are connected directly with the shift to the externalisation of the justification of educational change (Holmwood and Balon, 2018; Tveit and Lundahl, 2018), PISA shock dynamics included, or with non-state-based shifts towards non-transparent ways of being a legitimate and legitimating actor (Ball, 2010b).

However, what the Czech case demonstrates is how translation of transnational knowledge can influence local patterns of actorship relationally by creating positions or neutralising them. It indicates the new roles within the process of intensifying tensions between centralised and decentralised levels of governance (Piattoeva et al., 2018), and the roles of translating, mediating, and brokering (Fenwick et al., 2014: 5). The above analysis sheds light on an ecology of the legitimation of education which is formed on the glocal 'absent' ground (Lindberg and Knutsson, 2019) of several limited positions: (a) an undifferentiated mass of teachers without qualification for justificatory action with their knowledge rendered non-expert, (b) non-competent politicians with their knowledge rendered irrelevant, and (c) non-responsible reality-knowing NGO experts, with their statistical knowledge rendered being the reality itself (Grek, 2013).

Conclusions

Drawing on relational sociology and empirical research into the formation of actorship in the context of the Czech reform debates, this paper indicates that legitimating action (critical and justifying) is possible only in particularly arranged situations and does not stem above all from the formal responsibilities of actors in the authorised policy. The contradiction between position and action rather arises from the problematic assembling and arranging of qualifications in relation to knowledge within the situations. We have seen that the possession of expert knowledge provides justification but a limited basis for action. I have understood these contradictions through a particular analytical decomposition – a decomposition of the common category of actorship into more sensitive instances of competence, qualification, responsibility, knowledge, and audience. It was the specific arrangements (material and discursive) of these instances in a situation which formed opportunities for the public justificatory action.

In their study on the relation between experts and the state, Rinne et al. (2018: 92) asked: 'Who are the main experts in Brazil, China, and Russia recognised as responsible and legitimate actors to collect and interpret data in the QAE of school education policies?' From the above empirical evidence we can observe that in the Czech case, such expertise is fragmented among various positions. NGOs are recognised and legitimated to interpret, politicians and teachers as responsible for deciding and implementing. Although these scholars identified a different 'division of labour' between policymakers and experts in the three countries and, to a degree, similar limitations on the experts' agency, in the Czech case the legitimation of educational changes is led by non-state actors. What is essential is that, via this decomposition of actorship, it is possible to track the phenomenon of actorship in its many facets, and to understand forming of various actorship in different contexts. This, when conceived independently of formal national borders, would allow general trends in actorship and the various spaces in which it may occur to be seen.

The ecological perspective proved useful in detecting the relations of affirmations and neutralisations with its consequences for agency, described above as the parts of processes of the expertise loss and stabilising disadvantageous positions. The discussion indicated that these processes are substantially linked to contemporary destatisation of the legitimation of educational reforms, and absence of fundamental or essential ground for actorship. The case demonstrates that tensions among state and non-state actorship, as a process, are in a mutual relation to the redrawing of the meaning of expertise. This redrawing is intertwined with new roles of translators and mediators of transnational comparative data, with a loss of expertise of teachers and politicians, and simultaneously, with the absence of the policy executive voice from the debates during the period. An epistemological principle that leads to the production of a kind of knowledge has consequences for the definition of its proper bearer. As I have described above, in the case of Gorur's work (Gorur, 2015), the findings are an example of the contemporary transformation of the meaning of an expert from a producer of transnational comparative data to the knower of this data, which has consequences for the exclusion of those who are non-expert. It is the local political developments that shape these transnational influences, since these local developments determine the important policymakers or the lack thereof. In the Czech case it is predominantly destatisation which influences who the possessor of expert knowledge will be.

Nevertheless, the assemblages and patterns of actorship are not stable, solid, or essential; relations transform and are transformed. Identified contradictions between competence, qualification, responsibility, and action are relationally interlocked and it is a matter for further research to understand how agency in legitimating educational change will evolve and with what consequences.

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