

CZECH SCHOOL SYSTEM AFTER 1989

Tomáš Janík

1. Transformation of Czech school system

Transformation of the then Czechoslovakia from a Communist system to a democratic system began after 1989. This opened up new perspectives in all areas. It should be pointed out, however, that the transformation of the Czech school system after 1989 was not based on an official long-term strategy with the result that schools have undergone many changes that were occasionally unintentional. Most decisions were frequently made in an *ad hoc* manner. It is true that solutions were found for individual cases but the system as a whole was not reformed.

The Education Act (*Školský zákon*) of 1984 was not revised after the fall of Communism in 1989; it was merely amended. The real transformation of the Czech school system did not begin until 1990. An Act concerning universities and academies – *Zákon o vysokých školách* (No. 172/1990) was passed – as well as an Act concerning state administration and self-government – *Zákon o státní správě a samosprávě* (No. 564/1990). The latter affects school management and also grants schools autonomy with the effect that they are able to register themselves as legal entities. Schools attained autonomy through this process of transformation.

There were changes in the working conditions of teachers in 1992; the number of lessons taught was increased from 21 to 22 lessons per week by Decree 503/1992.

In 1997 the number of lessons taught was increased from 22 to 24 per week in the course of “rationalising” the educational system (Decree 68/1997); this change was reversed in 1999 (Decree 153/1999).

There were new administrative reforms in the year 2000: teachers’ salaries were increased by 8% with the aim of motivating young people to take up teaching. The educational reforms constitute part of this transformation and may be characterised as follows:

- removal of ideological indoctrination from education,
- freedom to choose schools and academic career,
- abolition of the state monopoly in respect of schooling,
- decentralisation of management in the education system,
- structural and curricular changes, and so on.

The new Education Act (*Školský zákon*) is implemented from 2005.

2. Reforms in school system

The starting point for the reform has often been criticised: the school is normative and uniform; the school is passive and verbal, achievement-oriented, detached from its surroundings, the courses are detailed and normatively defined; the school system is managed in an authoritative and centralised manner, communication between teachers and pupils is distorted; the emphasis is on external discipline; intellectual development is at the expense of social, emotional and moral development; examinations and assessments aim to identify mistakes, work on mistakes is out of all proportion; teachers have minimal competences, they are officials and enforcers of regulations; teacher education is uniform and so on.

Essential external reforms concern structural changes in the school system, school management and financing, *inter alia*, but they require embodiment in legislation. Essential internal reforms concern changes in the concept of education and school, purpose, objectives, functions and subject matter, teaching processes, images of people, the changed relationship to parents, to the social environment, to methods and forms of work.

OECD experts have studied the Czech school system. The OECD document from 1996 – *Reviews of National Policies for Education. Czech Republic. OECD, Paris 1996* – analyses the Czech school system and presents eleven recommendations for educational policy. The OECD document from 1999 - *Priority pro českou vzdělávací politiku. Mimořádné zasedání Výboru pro vzdělávání OECD v Praze 26. – 27. dubna 1999. Praha 1999* – evaluates how these eleven recommendations have been implemented in the Czech Republic.

Early in 2001 the Czech Government adopted Resolution No. 113 of 7 February 2001 entitled *Národní program rozvoje vzdělávání v České republice (The National Programme of Education Development in the Czech Republic)*, originally published as the “White Book”. This document boasts future-oriented aspects pointing the way forward to the year 2005 in some instances and to 2010 in others.

In the area of curriculum development the so-called “standard for elementary education” (*Standard základního vzdělávání*)¹ had already been published in 1995. This document defines the objectives of education and the basic teaching material in seven areas of elementary education. It is the basis for the development of curricula, textbooks and specific training programmes.

In the Czech Republic three specific educational programmes emerged in the field of elementary education and were officially approved by the Ministry for Education. Schools can decide for themselves which model they wish to work with. The concepts of humanisation and democratisation are important for this transformation. Acceptance of the concept of freedom was proclaimed.

- *Vzdělávací program Základní škola* – effective since 1996. It comprises a catalogue of 18 subjects and their curricula. The programme defines standards for the levels of knowledge and skills of elementary school pupils. The majority of Czech elementary schools, around 75% of all schools from the 1st to 9th grades, work with it.
- *Obecná škola* – also effective since 1996. It was initially divided into two programmes (*Obecná škola* for the 1st to 5th years) and (*Občanská škola* for the 6th to 9th years). From the 1997/98 school year onwards both programmes were combined under the name *Obecná škola*. This programme boasts new subjects, including “acting”, which is optional and also religion, *inter alia*. The emphasis is on the personality development of children. Around 13% of pupils are being educated under this programme, most of them in the primary school sector.
- *Národní škola* – effective since 1997. This programme was designed for the 1st to 9th years of elementary school; it emphasises the scientific components of education and operates in accordance with the principles of project teaching and the integration of two or three subjects. Only around 0.8% of pupils are learning under this programme.

Schools also have the option of choosing an alternative programme (*Waldorfská škola, Jenský plán, inter alia*), but this requires approval by the Ministry of Education. In the field of elementary education only around 1% of pupils are educated under these alternative programmes.

From 2005 are in the Czech republic new *Framework educational programme* implemented.

Functions of the school

E. WALTEROVÁ (2001) points out that transmission as the traditional duty of the school is changing. Nowadays it must take the interactive and integrative duties into consideration above all. The school must accordingly fulfil the following functions:

- a methodical and coordinative function,
- a technological function,
- a professionalisation function,
- a social function,
- a personalisation function,
- a protective function (cf. Walterová, 2001, p.12).

At present Czech schools are in pursuit of a new school culture and this may be understood as an innovative process. Teachers now have increased responsibilities as a result of changes in the sphere of action of the school. Teacher education should also respond when there are changes in the objectives and functions of the school. In this context the question arises as to whether teachers are at all prepared for their new functions (new roles).

3. Challenges for teachers

After 1989 teachers found themselves with a great deal of personal freedom to develop their creativity and numerous new challenges in respect of subject matter and methodology as a result. They were now able to choose freely from the textbooks on offer etc, but teachers had been used to having everything come “from above” for 40 years.

However, new “challenges” for teachers also meant new demands being made on them. Teachers now had to respond to the different needs and interests of children, and respond to the new demands concomitant with school autonomy (flexible adaptation of the curricula, teaching methods and forms of work). Teachers were meant to be active, i.e. they were meant to become more involved in teaching and to work together with pupils, colleagues and parents.

Teachers have been allowed to play an active part in the transformation. What is more, they are seen to be involved in the reform process. This is probably one of the greatest challenges for teachers. The foregoing changes in the objectives and functions of the school also provide new “challenges” for teachers:

- Teachers can organise themselves into a variety of professional groups (e.g. NEMES, PAU) and so play an active role in the transformation process.
- Within the framework of school autonomy granted to schools after 1989, teachers can embark on a quest for their own school profile. The Ministry for Education controls 90% of subjects on the curricula and leaves schools 10%. In individual subjects responsibility is shared 70:30.
- In many schools parents are involved in the life of the school. This results in a school community (opening of the school to the outside world).
- Teachers can also take on the role of innovator.
- Within the framework of teacher education and further training, schools and teachers are able to choose from an existing selection of study programmes, courses, lectures, seminars

or workshops. Teachers are introduced to new teaching methods and forms of work for example.

- New topics (integration and inclusion, multi-culturalism, ICT and so on) are now incorporated in the study programmes. Teachers can integrate them into their sphere of action; there are also several statements in the Czech White Book in this connection: „...to compensate health and socio-cultural disadvantage of some individuals through the targeted support of developmental programmes for them at all levels of schools, by means of introduction of preparatory classes, inclusion of special schools in the system of standard schools and optimum integration of those who have special needs among other pupils, to improve conditions for education of national and ethnical minorities and aliens, by means of legislative measures gradually integrate lower years of multi-year gymnasia with the second phase of the basic school alongside with the implementation of differentiation and individualised teaching of heterogeneous groups of pupils and development of care for talented and gifted children at schools and extra-curricular activities” ([http://www.msmt.cz/cp1250/web/12/White Book.doc](http://www.msmt.cz/cp1250/web/12/White%20Book.doc)).
- There are also opportunities to participate in EU programmes (e.g. Comenius, Leonardo). Staff who are responsible for teacher education in Czech schools are “ageing” because many young graduates of teacher education do not enter the teaching profession.

The reasons are as follows:

- The work of teachers is becoming more difficult (increased aggression, lack of interest, negative attitude of pupils towards school: inattentiveness, lack of discipline, and so on) (cf. Blížkovský, B.; Kučerová, S.; Kurelová, M. a kol., p. 94; or Seebauer, 1997, p. 171).
- Teachers are not well paid. Moreover, starting salaries are low. Czech teachers are right at the bottom of international OECD salary league tables. Nowadays around 35% of teachers have a second job for reasons of welfare (cf. Blížkovský, B.; Kučerová, S.; Kurelová, M. a kol. 2000, p. 45)
- A negative image of teachers is cultivated; the teaching profession is held in low esteem.
- Training in the educational faculties is largely “of a general nature” or so “specialised” that graduates can put their training to good use outside the school as well. It is difficult to motivate young people to enter the teaching profession when they are able to “command a higher price” for their foreign language and computer skills in many companies”.

4. Conclusion

What has actually been taking place in the Czech school system during the last 12 years? Unfortunately, it is impossible to make any real objective, reliable and general observations. J. PRŮCHA (1997/98) observed five years ago in *Učitelské listy, 1997-98, č. 3*: “Complex research on Czech schools was not conducted after 1998.” Even today it is possible to repeat this statement with complete indifference. It is difficult to comment on contradictory findings consisting of different, mostly particularistic (empirical) investigations. In the Czech Republic we are experiencing a gradual “velvet” educational reform.

In this situation the Czech school can say whatever it wants ... on the “ideal axis of enthusiasm” these statements would range from $-\infty$ to $+\infty$.

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