

NEW CURRICULUM IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Kateřina Vlčková

The Velvet revolution of 1989 started a wave of changes in the education system of the Czech Republic. There were many legislative changes, changes in the administration, as well as in the curriculum. A hierarchic system of national curriculum is now being prepared that is based on the fact that the Czech Republic is entering the European Union. In this text you will learn about what curriculum is, what the curriculum is like in the Czech Republic and you will be encouraged to discuss with your teachers what it is like in your country.

1. What is „curriculum“?

The first question we should answer is “What is ‘curriculum’?” Try to answer the following questions with your teacher:

- Do you know the word “curriculum”? What does it mean? Do you know where it came from?
- Do you use the term „curriculum“ in your language?
- If so, what is the meaning of the word?
- If not, is there a word with a similar meaning?

The word curriculum is a new word in the Czech language. It comes from English; the basic meaning is a course of study offered in a school or college; it has a similar meaning to ‘syllabus’ or ‘timetable’. Many people know the word from the term ‘curriculum vitae’, but this means something a bit different from what the word ‘curriculum’ means in the scientific and professional language of education. In the education field the best-known expression is the ‘national curriculum’, which is a common and state-guaranteed frame that determines the objectives (what the children should know) and content (learning material) for children in the period of their compulsory school attendance. The term was first used in an official document in the Great Britain in the eighties and today it is used in many countries. Its primary meaning today includes the general study objectives and goals, basic subject matter, results that should be achieved in various periods of study and directions for the realization at schools.

When we speak about curricula documents in the Czech republic we mean formal documents that state what the whole conception of the state or school looks like, what kind of objectives should be achieved, what the subject matter is and other things. These documents are very important for schools, the state and the people. They say what the pupils should know (standards) after a set period of their study. The results can be evaluated (tested) and compared within the entire country or even within Europe. Therefore we are trying to modernize the structure of our curricula.

1 Curricula documents in the Czech Republic

Until recently, there had been no vertical hierarchical system of curricula documents in the Czech Republic. Before 1989 there had been a unified state education system. Since the 1990's many schools have developed various study programmes and many new documents have been prepared. Today there are more than five official **Education programmes** (Národní škola, Základní škola, Obecná škola, Daltonský plan, Waldorfská škola,...) for the compulsory education (6 – 15 years). These programmes are covered in the new and more general “**Framework Education Programme for Basic Education**” (Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání). This general program is now introduced into schools. It existed some years before in an experimental form, when basic schools used an older document, which was called “*Standard for Basic Education*” (Standard základního vzdělávání).

Every school is to prepare its own new “**School Education Programme**” (Školní vzdělávací program) before September 2007. This school programme should define the main aims of the school, its objectives and specifications according to their conditions. All parts of the Framework Programme must be respected in these programmes.

A new document, the so-called ‘national curriculum’, is being prepared, which will be called the “**National Education Programme**” (Státní program vzdělávání - SPV). It is intended for children and youth between 3 and 19 years. This programme introduces the main principles of curricula policy of the state, defines general educational objectives and areas of education, the conditions for implementation of the SPV into schools, the regulations for preparing schools' education programmes, the necessary legislation and the conditions for evaluation of the results. The National Education Programme will cover all Framework programmes, i. e. framework programmes for pre-primary, primary with lower secondary, upper secondary comprehensive and upper secondary vocational education. Today, the role of SPV is played by another important document about the national educational (and curricular) policy - the ‘**White Book**’ - **National Programme for the Development of Education**¹ (2001). It is a document about the state's objectives in the area of education for children and adults. The economical, political and educational proclamations of the White Book should be realised by the years 2005 – 2010. This document is similar to others in the EU-countries. The White Book introduced new directions of the educational and curricular policy and the new structure of curricular documents made on two levels, national and school level, as mentioned above.

Chart: Structure of curricula documents in the Czech Republic

State education programme					
Framework Education Programme for Pre-primary Education		Framework Education Programme for Basic Education (primary and lower secondary)		Framework Education Programme for Upper Secondary Education a) for comprehensive schools (gymnázia) b) for vocational schools	
School Education Programme	<i>user manual for developing the school ed. programme</i>	School Education Programme	<i>user manual for developing the school ed. programme</i>	School Education Programme	<i>user manual for developing the school ed. programme</i>

¹ see the appendix

The **Framework Education Programme** (Rámcový vzdělávací program - RVP) will be there for each stage of education - for 1/ pre-school education (mateřská škola), 2/ primary and lower secondary education (základní škola) and 3/ upper secondary education (střední škola). The RVPs are the bases for schools' education programmes and contain general objectives of pre-school, primary or secondary education; general content of education in specific areas, characteristics of each single; educational objectives specific for each single area; main activities (that is opportunities which should be offered and ensured in particular area); expected results (that is competencies which the child usually obtains in particular area); main difficulties which impair the educational process and can endanger its results, the prerequisites of pre-primary, primary or secondary education e. g. factual, organising and professional characteristics of the educational environment which influence the educational quality; possible use of the Framework Programme for education of children with special educational needs and exceptionally talented children; requirements on educational evaluations of the education; basic requirements on teacher's work and professional responsibility; principles and recommendations for processing school's education programme. The Programme should influence not only on the content of the education, but also the educational priorities of the school, implementing the objectives, the school's self-assessment and preparing the teachers for the new working methods.

Discussion

- How does the curricula documents structure look in your country?
- What is the most important official educational document in your country?
- Have there been any changes in the area of curricula documents in your country recently?
- Is there a discussion going on about any of these topics in your country?

2 Curriculum at the pre-school level²

After 1989, schools stopped using the unified "Education Programme for crèche (jesle) and nursery school (mateřské školy)". It had been questioned even before 1989 for its excessively demanding and too binding nature that did not leave room for individual children's needs or for teachers' creativity. After 1989, when the restrictions were loosened, many nursery schools (mateřské školy) adopted their own approach.

In April 2001 the **Framework Education Programme for Pre-school Education** (Rámcový vzdělávací program pro předškolní vzdělávání) was published after a public discussion. It is a recommended document for education in nursery schools, special nursery schools and in preparatory classes for socially disadvantaged children. The Framework Programme is the basis for education programmes in pre-school institutions and contains general objectives of pre-school education; general content of education in five areas (biological, psychological, interpersonal, socio-cultural and environmental), results which should be obtained and all the other topics that appear in the other framework programmes. The nursery schools will develop their own education programmes on the basis of the Framework Programme. The school programmes are used in practice from September 2003.

² This capitol is for students from the Netherlands, Belgium and other countries where the compulsory education starts earlier than in 6 years of children.

A nursery school (mateřská škola) enjoys high flexibility in organisation. The existing alternative structures comprise several nursery schools of the **Waldorf type**, nursery schools with elements taken from **M. Montessori's system** and **Christian** nursery schools.

On the basis of the international programme **Step by step**, a Czech version (Start together – Začít spolu) has been implemented in **1994**. Its main feature is an *inclusive approach to ethnic minorities and children from disadvantaged environment*. 44 nursery schools and 7 preparatory classes at basic schools (základní škola) have been following this programme.

In connection with the international programme "**Health Promoting Schools**" the Healthy Nursery Schools Programme was designed in 1996. It has been implemented into 88 nursery schools under the supervision of its authors, and is available to others. A guideline is available for teachers working with this programme.

All these types of nursery schools are covered by the more general curricula document "Framework Programme for Pre-school Education".

Discussion:

If you are interested, discuss with your colleague what the children should learn in the pre-school education in your country; compare it with what the teacher has told you about the situation in the Czech Republic.

3 Curriculum for basic education

The general objectives of the basic schools (základní škola) in the Czech Republic is to provide basic education and mental, moral, aesthetic, labour, health, physical and environmental education; it allows religious education as well. It prepares pupils for further studies and work. Educational objectives of základní škola are specified in the **Standard for Basic Education** (Standard základního vzdělávání) published in 1995. (In 1997, the document was enlarged in connection with integration of the Czech Republic to international structures - European dimension etc.). The education standard stipulates educational objectives in seven specified educational areas (languages, mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, aesthetic education, health and life-style education, crafts and technology) that are divided into educational branches. The core subject matter for basic education, which ensures education in sequence and comparability in all types of schools, is then specified within the particular branches. The core subject matter for the 1st stage is dealt with separately, since the 1st stage is relatively independent and because of the expected evaluation of educational results upon its completion. The basic education standard is a binding norm when designing education programmes and it serves as a criterion for evaluation of the results of educational activities.

Starting from 2004/05 and more then from 2007 the Standard will be replaced by **Framework Education Programme for Basic Education**, as described in the previous chapters. The aims and content of the Programme are connected with the Framework Programme for Pre-primary Education and are the basis for creating a framework education programmes

for upper secondary education. Schools are to develop their own education programmes on the basis of the Framework Programme.

The **Framework Education Programme for Basic Education (RVP ZV)** defines 9 areas of compulsory education as general educational objectives: 1/ learning strategies and motivation for life-long learning, 2/ the basis for creative and logical thinking and problem solving, 3/ the basis for comprehensive communication, 4/ co-operation and respect of work and success of others, 5/ development of independent and reliable personality, 6/ development of positive feelings in behaviour and feeling, 7/ positive relationship to health, 8/ the ability to live with other people, 9/ recognizing and using the objective possibilities.

RVP ZV defines 4 groups of key competencies that should be cultivated: 1/ *learning*, 2/ *problem solving*, 3/ *communication*, 4/ *work activities and co-operation*.

RVP ZV defines 9 broad education areas (some of them are divided into branches – subjects) with objectives and expected competencies, they are:

- 1) language and language communication (Czech language and literature, foreign languages),
- 2) mathematics and its application,
- 3) information and communication technologies,
- 4) man and the world,
- 5) man and society (education for citizenship, history),
- 6) man and the nature (physics, chemistry, biology, geography),
- 7) arts and culture (musical education, education in arts, eventually facultative dramatic education),
- 8) man and health (education for health, education in sports),
- 9) man and work,

RVP ZV defines 6 cross-sectional topics: 1/ education of democratic citizens, 2/ personal and social education, 3/ environmental education, 4/ medial education, 5/ education of thinking in global and European context, 6/ intercultural education.

Discussion:

- Do you have similar objectives and areas of education in your country?
- Are there any differences? Do you have any especial subjects in your country?
- How important are foreign languages or informatics (ICT) at the elementary level?
- Do you know the goals of education in the EU? Is your country trying to identify itself with them?

3.1 Education programmes in basic education

To achieve the individual objectives set by the Standard of Basic Education (1995) or the Framework education programme for basic education - RVP ZV (2001, 2002) various **education programmes** can be employed. The education programme specifies subjects and their timetables, and defines the content - i. e. syllabus; teaching methods are usually suggested as well. There are three main education programmes in the Czech system that have been gradually approved for basic schools (Základní škola, Obecná škola and Národní škola). In addition to these, there are programmes for children with special needs

and alternative programmes (Waldorf, Montessori, Dalton, Jena plan, etc.) or projects (Healthy promoting school):

- **Základní škola** (Education Programme Basic school, 1996) describes a list of 18 school subjects and their syllabus, their timetable, their objectives for elementary education etc. Most of the Czech schools work with this programme; they have about 83 % of all pupils (2000) in the basic education.
- **Obecná škola** (General school, 1995). At the beginning of this programme, there were two programmes for basic education, Obecná škola for the 1st stage of basic school (primary level) and Občanská škola (Civic school) for the lower secondary level, for the 6. - 9. class. Since 1997/ 98 both programmes are conjoined into „Obecná škola“. In comparison to Základní škola, some things are different in this programme; it introduces new subjects (dramatic education, religion etc.). The key objective is personality development. About 12% of pupils (2000) get their education with this programme, most of them only at the primary level (1st stage of basic school).
- **Národní škola** (National school, 1997). This programme is for 1.-9. class of the basic education, it stresses the nature-scientific feature of education, learning through projects and integration of two or three subjects. About 1,1% of pupils (2000) learn according to this programme.

All these education programmes have been designed for the basic school as a whole and have comparable outputs at the end of primary education, allowing the pupils to continue in a different programme in the lower secondary stage, although pupils are recommended to continue in the same programme throughout basic education since each of these education programmes slightly varies in its educational character. In the school year 2001/2002 most schools used the základní škola programme (93 % of schools, 91 % of pupils) and only 14 schools had their own education programme. Now the number of schools with their own educational school programme increase and it is obligatory for schools to prepare their own educational school programme. Within the most often used základní škola programme, standard curricula for each branch of extended teaching have been approved, which could be also used for other education programmes. In 2001, the had *Modification of Education Programme Základní škola for Pupils from Socially and Culturally Disadvantaged Families* been redone (originally it was from 1998 and it was intended for the Romany children). It encourages devoting a greater number of lessons to Family Education and to Practical Subjects in grades six to nine.

In the Czech Republic, there are various possibilities open for pupils who finished five years of primary education. They can either continue studying at the basic school, or choose to complete their compulsory education at an 8-year comprehensive school (osmileté gymnázium). Of course, this is the parents' decision and the pupils must meet admission requirements of the particular school. Yet another possibility for the pupils is to finish seven years at a basic school and then choose to study at a 6-year comprehensive school (šestileté gymnázium), where again there are admission requirements to pass. These gymnáziums are comprehensive lower and upper secondary schools preparing for study at universities. The pupils who complete their compulsory education at 8-year gymnázium follow the curriculum for 8-year gymnázium, the curriculum of the 6-year gymnázium is derived from the 8-year one.

3.2 The timetable

The new total number of compulsory lessons per month according to the new **RVP ZV** for the primary stage of the basic school (základní škola) (that is 1st to 5th year) is 109 + 9 disposable lessons. For the second stage of the basic school (that is 6th to 9th year), or the lower secondary stage of comprehensive schools, it is 112 lessons + 10 facultative ones. A lesson always has 45 minutes.

The timetable of the Education Programme **Základní škola**³ says that the total number of compulsory lessons (45 min) in a week must range from 112 to 115 lessons (114 lessons is optimum) at the 1st stage of a základní škola and from 113 to 116 lessons (115 lessons is optimum) at the 2nd stage of a základní škola, while the number of lessons in individual years can vary one lesson from the optimal number of lessons per week, in the following manner:

<i>first stage (from 6 or 7 year old)</i>	<i>second stage (11 – 15 years old youth)</i>
1 st year - 20 lessons	6 th year - 27 lessons
2 nd year - 22 lessons	7 th year - 28 lessons
3 rd year - 23 lessons	8 th year - 30 lessons
4 th year - 24 lessons	9 th year - 30 lessons
5 th year - 25 lessons	

The timetable for the 1st – 3rd year allows education without fixed time limits for individual courses, time spans can be made shorter than one lesson (i. e. 45 min) and individual activities can be combined and interrelated. The timetable for the 2nd stage also includes optional courses. The introduction of these lessons cannot result in exceeding the number of lessons per week. Pupils of different age can be grouped. The timetable for both the 1st and 2nd stages can include non-compulsory subjects as well - their time scope may exceed the fixed number of lessons. Their number is not limited.

The timetable divides education of individual educational areas and fields into subjects. The annual minimum time for individual subjects is mentioned on the www-pages of Eurydice on Eurydice. The timetable also specifies when and how many lessons should deal with topics in the following areas within the compulsory subjects (see Eurydice – Eurydice). Religious education can be taught as a non-compulsory subject, or as an optional or compulsory subject in the education programmes of denominational or private schools.

Subject of the Education Programme of the Základní škola:

Czech Language, Foreign Language, Mathematics, Local Environment, Nature Sciences, National History and Geography, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Geography, History, Civics, Family Education, Music, Art, Practical Subjects, Physical Education, Optional Subjects

In years 1 to 3, subjects may be taught in units, in shorter periods than regular lessons, and different activities may be combined, provided that the set teaching time for different subjects is respected. In years 4 to 9, the school usually organises English or German lessons according to the pupils' interests and school conditions. Optional subjects may be introduced in year 7, but must be included in years 8 and 9. They include foreign languages, conversation in a foreign language, computer science, technical education, technical drawing, introduction to economics and accounting, seminars of social sciences, seminars and

³ see <<http://www.eurydice.org/Erybase>> - Czech education system, chapter 4

practical work of geography, seminars and practical work of natural sciences, administrative services or home economics. This list of optional subjects may be extended by the head of the school, as long as they observe the Basic Education Standard.

If other than a one-week cycle is used, it is necessary to describe and justify this alternative cycle. The head of the school can, without a consultation with the organising body, make organisational changes, such as irregular distribution of lessons, grouping of classes, project education, module curriculum etc., provided that the prescribed extent of curriculum is accomplished, no additional money required, the educational staff involved in those changes and the school council (Rada školy), if there is one, agree with the changes.

Discussion

- How many lessons do the children in your country have per week?
- Do the Czech children have more lessons or less?
- What days in the week do they go to school?
- How many holidays do the children in your country have? Compare it with other countries and with the Czech Republic. Which country has the longest holidays? Where are the shortest ones?
- How does a school day look like in your country? Are there any differences in comparison with the Czech system?

3.3 Alternative programmes and organisational variations

As an organisational variation of základní škola, some schools are adjusted to the population density and are *not fully organised*, e. g. that have only one stage, usually 1st one. If appropriate, schools with few classes can group small numbers of children from different years into one class. Classes with extended education and training of some subjects (speciální třídy, specializované třídy) can be also considered to be organisational variations. The Ministry of Education approves alternative education programmes for experiment verification.

In connection with the international programme "**Health Promoting Schools**" the Healthy Nursery Schools Programme was designed in 1996; in 2000, 90 základní škola followed this programme. The project can be joined by any school regardless of the school programme. In 1996 the Ministry of Education approved the verification of the **Waldorf programme** for 7 selected schools; in 1998 it was the **Montessori** programme at two schools. Other schools apply elements of Waldorf type of education as well. A scarce number of schools use elements of **Jena Plan**, **Dalton Plan** and Montessori pedagogy. Only 1% of pupils are educated within these programmes.

In the school year 1998/99 the *home schooling* was open as an experiment for five years. In 2000/01 250 pupils were participating.

Discussion

- Do you know how many pupils attend alternative schools in your country?
- How do people understand the term "alternative school" in your country?

- Do you know about any innovation programme in your country?

3.4 Children with special needs

For children with special needs and disabilities there are schools called speciální škola (special school) that belong to the area of special education. 4,1% of pupils attend some school for special needs.

4 Curriculum at the middle school level

Curriculum at the middle school level (e. g. higher secondary level) is divided into two parts. There are many curricula documents for vocational education. These have a common general part of curriculum and a special part different depending on the area of education. These documents are called *Framework education programme for vocational education*. For more information see www.nuov.cz.

The second type of curricula documents is the *Framework educational programme for comprehensive middle schools* (gymnázia). The programme is now realised in an experimental form and there is a large public discussion about it. This programme is build on the basis of the *Framework educational programme for basic education*. Until this new document will be obligatory in schools, the older curricula document called *Standard vzdělávání na čtyřletém gymnáziu* have to be used. For more information see wwwv.uppraha.cz.

5 Statistics

- 91% of pupils attend basic schools (základní škola)
- 8,6% of pupils in the time of compulsory education attend gymnasium prolonged comprehensive schools)
- 0,08% of pupils attend konzervatoř (music school)
- 308 víceletá gymnasia (prolonged comprehensive schools) and 4 000 základní škola and 5 konzervatoří
- 56 973 children are integrated into standard classes and 11 550 into special (speciální třídy) or specialized classes (specializované třídy).
- 44 986 children attend schools specialised for teaching languages
- 12 041 attend schools specialized for teaching mathematics and natural sciences
- 23 440 attend schools specialized for sports
- 15 810 have other specialization

Source: 200/01, 2001/02, Eurybase <http://www.eurydice.org/Eurybase/Application/gettext.asp?tablename=CZ_VO>

6 Conclusion

The curriculum in the Czech Republic has changed very much in the 1990's. New or renewed subjects and topics were introduced (dramatic education, computer and ICT, western European languages, European dimension, family education, sexual education, drugs prevention, environmental education), standard subjects (history, social science, literature etc.) have been changed. There is no obligation as for learning Russian or socialistic political sciences. The basic school is now longer (not 8, but 9 years), even though the compulsory education period is shorter (not 10, but 9). The curriculum is not so prescriptive anymore, there is just the framework programme telling what to teach and what kind of results should be reached. There are many different school education programmes, and therefore the mobility within the system is more complicated and difficult. For example, when the child follows the programme *Národní škola* in the first five years, it is then difficult to learn the next four years following the *Základní škola* programme (which is more abstract, more directed and more knowledge-oriented). The new Framework Education Programme introduces challenges in integration of learning subject; they allow the teacher to work in projects, to connect e. g. natural sciences or history with geography etc. We speak about integration of children with special needs much more too. The partners of the school (the community, sponsors, parents) have chance to learn about the life of the school. More changes will be mentioned in other chapters of this book. The first years in the 21st century are years of stabilization of the school system and its further development.

Discussion:

- If you have already visited a Czech school, what education programme do they follow? Did you notice any differences?
- Are there any curriculum innovations or even reforms going on in your country? What kind of innovations? Which are the most important?

7 URLs for self-study

<http://www.eurydice.org>

section Eurybase – Czech educational system - chapter 3 - pre-primary education and 4 – elementary education, time tables etc., chapter 5 – upper secondary education

<http://www.msmt.cz/cp1250/web/12/WhiteBook.doc>

White book on education - national programme for developing the education in the Czech republic

In Czech language – about curriculum

www.vuppraha.cz - pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, upper comprehensive secondary curriculum and curriculum for special needs

www.nuov.cz - upper secondary curriculum for vocational schools

www.msmt.cz - official documents of Ministry of Education