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Some aspects of the national curriculum and the teaching of civic education in the Czech Republic

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To understand both how civics education should be taught and how the curriculum was created in the Czech Republic, we need first to describe the development of the school system after 1989, the traditions of Czech education, and the Czech curricula specifications.

Structural reform

One of the first features of the pre-war style of selective education to return to the Czech Republic after 1989 was the rise of seven or eight-year grammar schools, the first of which began in 1990. However, in Western Europe this double-tracked system had progressively been eliminated, with a greater focus on equal educational chances. Unified schools had become discredited in the Czech Republic, because they stifled differentiation among children, and did not acknowledge their individual abilities, needs, and interests. There was great pressure on children due to increased workloads, and intolerance for anything that was considered out of the norm. Children who could not cope with the amount of work expected were sent to special classes (dyslexic classrooms, special schools, etc.). There are now calls for the integration of pupils with special needs into normal programmes: this gives some indication of the democratic tendency of our educational system.

Curricular reform

The inner changes are more important than changes to the outer structure. The so-called 'new conception', developed between 1976 and 1990, had many failings, some of which are still present. These were mainly due to excessive curriculum content, coupled with the use of the least difficult language. There was a large number of subjects and a lack of integration between them, resulting in an educational atomisation that persists today. There has been a change in the preferred view of knowledge, with individual abilities and progress now considered less important than approach and attitude. This shift in values has been the most important change in our educational system. Teachers themselves have initiated these transformations. PAU (The friends of engaged learning), NEMES (The independent intersectional team for education transformation) and the Primary School Teachers Association are among the professional organisations which have participated in the creation of new educational programmes, in both General School and National School. These groups take part in drawing up standards, authoring books and methodological materials, and are connected with several research projects dedicated to curriculum building. Teachers themselves have spontaneously started to compensate for the absence of well-considered state curriculum strategies.

The Czech national curriculum

The Czech national curriculum is overseen by the state through the Department of Education and by Czech school inspectors, who are entitled to control the documentation of the school education programmes. The 'Primary Education Standard' (1995) and 'Goal

Standards and the Basic Subject Matter for Primary Schools' (1994) are the main curriculum documents. The Goal Standard is defined as a set of intended and socially essential tasks. These two documents form the basis for national primary school curricula. Moreover, there is a call for special evaluating standards to make the national curriculum function as a complex system. These standards are outlined in the Primary School Programme in a paragraph entitled 'What a pupil should know', and are structured for each individual subject and grade. The Primary School Programme is used by 70% of Czech primary schools. Other schools are using the National School or General School programmes. If a primary school wants to use another education programme it asks the Department of Education for permission. The main difference between the Czech national curriculum and curricula used abroad is in the number of subjects taught: 18 to 22 subjects are taught here (for instance, pupils can choose from 5 languages). There is an emphasis on mother tongue teaching. There are twice as many subjects taught as there are in Italy, for example. The lack of integration between subjects is another difference. Elementary teaching of history and geography are the only integrated subjects at the first level of primary school. These are later followed by civic education.

Civic education

Civic education is one of the social sciences taught in the Czech Republic. It began as civic learning and education in 1923, and was conceived as an alternative to religious education. Its purpose was to educate people in moral, social and spiritual principles, and make them appreciate and love their country, nation and republic; the aim was to raise humanitarian and democratic individuals. Three main rules were introduced to support this concept: the rule of life - stressing community and togetherness; the moral rule – concentrating on humanity and virtues; and the basic judgement norm - focusing on justice and order. After World War II the education system returned to the pre-war conception, however there was a considerable orientation towards the policy of the government. New subjects, 'The CSR and USSR constitutions' were introduced instead of civic education. In 1959 the original civic education returned to the curriculum, being taught one lesson per week, and this carried on unchanged until 1990.

Civic education then once again followed the pre-war curriculum concept. After a series of corrections it was later included in the National School Programme. Nowadays the subject is taught at the second level of primary school, consisting of knowledge from the fields of history, geography, constitutional law, social politics, economics, and anthropology. These domains are assigned Primary Education Standards. J. Valkova (1998), taking in account the aims of social science teaching, divided the basic education standards of civic education into three main areas:

- Individual needs. Pupils acquire certain life and social orientation abilities, and interpersonal communication ability.
- Social sciences knowledge. Pupils acquire individual knowledge concerning the subjects included in civic education curriculum (geography, law, economics, etc.)
- Civics and global education. Pupils acquire knowledge essential for their roles as good citizens, and learn to understand key democratic principles, to recognise and compare social phenomena in their own country with similar or different phenomena in Europe and the world and to develop their own opinions about the local and global problems of modern society.

Civic education is developed further in the three basic education programmes: Primary school, General school, and National school.

Primary school

Primary school adheres to the principles of the Primary Education Standard. Civic education is taught four lessons per week in sixth to ninth grades. The authors of the programme are well aware of the need for cogent goals, and formulate their ideas in the section called ‘What a pupil should know’. Civic education in the Primary School curriculum embodies:

- Specific goals
- Educational content and organisation access
- Individual class contents
- Activities.

Individual class contents are divided into theme topics with summarising titles, containing definitions of central terms, particular aims, and examples of topic extensions. Each field is treated in similar depth, apart from Law. This particular domain is emphasised because it is dealt with only within civic education lessons.

General School

The General School programme is called ‘civic school’ at the second level of primary school. Civic education is taught twice a week, and has citizenship in its title. The most important feature of this is its stress on moral education, and that is why the authors consider civic education to be the pivotal subject. Ethics is the most important discipline, permeating all knowledge, and should not be taught as moral commentary, but rather all the material should be presented according to an ethical vision of human life. The subject matter is divided into six mutually interactive areas: National History, Geography, Law, Anthropology, Ecology and Politics.

This programme is conceived as a set of terms, which should merely guide the teacher. The programme is systematic because it demonstrates the idea of citizenship using children’s own experiences at first, and then the programme extends the idea to the level of a city, a region, a country, a supranational complex, and world society. Although it leads to complexity, a wider social view is imposed on the individual components of civic education (life style, free-time management, self-education, conflict solving and professional orientation). The incompatibility of the Primary Education Standard with the civic school program is problematic: this probably is a result of the civic school education programme having preceded the publication of the Standard.

National School

The National School has a very open programme, which rather describes an overall conception and philosophy, and gives teachers plenty of space to improvise. Civic education is taught twice a week. The theoretical and philosophical aspects of the programme are very humanistic. The cognitive area is set around the central theme of the world seen from the global view. The authors advise teachers to integrate the subject matter by creating topic lessons and using project methods in their work.

As far as civic education is concerned, all of the aforementioned educational programmes stress the need for an interdisciplinary and integrating approach. Unfortunately, the great number of terms and definitions conflicts with this aim. Teachers, trying diligently to embrace the whole width of the subject matter, are in danger of overloading children with information. Primary School seems to be the most useable programme because it tends to offer some direction for the teacher's work. On the other hand, the most serious problem of all the programmes is their emphasis on theory rather than on the actual experience of the learners. Some teachers try to eliminate this educational disadvantage by using appropriate methods such as project teaching.

Projective teaching in civic education

The topics featured in today's civic education are both interesting and relevant. The subject also offers a certain space for reactions to the latest events and happenings in the world and society. The civic education project is very closely connected with life. The project content is similar to real life situations, which leads to a better orientation of pupils in case they face some troubles in their everyday lives. The knowledge acquired by children during the project lessons is integrated, global, and not at all isolated. That is why projects often include and join together knowledge from more than one subject at a time. Knowledge acquired through civic education is derived from many science domains and disciplines. Projective teaching helps to integrate that knowledge in a natural way.

The Czech centre of project education is the primary school in Obřístvi, where Mgr. Jitka Kasova is the headteacher as well as the civics teacher. She is one of the teachers who contributed significantly to the educational transformation of the country. She has developed some interesting civics projects, which were later used in many Czech schools. Some of the most interesting projects were 'Communication', 'Whose is the school – ours', and 'Citizen'. The aim of the long-term project 'Communication' was to create and put into practice a set of proper communication rules. The 'Whose is the school – ours' project also has considerable educational value. Children created and published their own school regulations, which made them realise that school could look the way they designed it. The function of the 'Citizen' project function was to show some actual problems in the city, try to find possible solutions, and solve them together with city representatives. The 'Citizen' appears in various modifications in many schools in the Czech Republic and abroad, where it is further explored as part of the international Socrates project.

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