

Reflection on the Curricular Reform with an Emphasis on Preschool Education in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

Since 1990, preschool education in the Czech Republic has undergone significant qualitative changes. The main focus has been on personality-oriented education of the child. In accordance with this concept, a two-tier preschool curriculum was established in 2001 including the school and the state level. After a period of verification, the curriculum was enacted in 2007. Teachers began to design the curriculum of their own school, reflecting its conditions and respecting an individualized approach to education. The curricular reform represents an important process, which is the focus of the present qualitative survey. The objective of the research was to use a holistic approach to identify the constitutive elements of the curricular reform in the context of everyday life in kindergartens, but with a deeper understanding. The aim of the study is to answer the following questions: Is the implementation of the preschool curriculum in accordance with the objectives of the curricular reform? What are the causes of the drawbacks identified? What are the prospects of the implementation of the curriculum? The basic research method was a document analysis involving research results, reports of the Czech School Inspectorate, and analyses of school educational programmes. The method of document analysis was supplemented with a semi-structured interview with kindergarten teachers and university professionals involved in the education of future teachers. Using a suspenseful procedure the authors present important knowledge relating to the curricular reform in the context of preschool education. The paper describes the effect of crucial conditions on the implementation of the reform.

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Introduction

Curricular reforms are an integral part of education policy. Their success depends on the actual conditions and the preparedness of all participants. The aim of the paper is to present the results of a long-term research study on preschool curriculum in Czech kindergartens based on an analysis of relevant documents, professional texts, and reports. The results of the research should inform about the success of the implementation of the new preschool curriculum as a natural part of the curricular reform in the Czech Republic. *The curricular reform* is an officially organised and implemented modification of the system of education (Prokop, 2099, p. 564). In this context, the following should be explained at the very beginning: *What is our understanding of the term curriculum?* In the context of preschool education, this term is understood in the sense of the Latin *currere* – *heading, promoting child development* in accordance with the child's capabilities, needs and interests.

The present research is based on the concept by Hesse and Manz (1974), according to whom curricular research should include both explicit and implicit curriculum and thus contribute to a revision of learning plans. Therefore, its purpose is to define the objectives and content of education. Traditional content of education is revised, its consistency improved, and it is checked whether it corresponds to the current state of knowledge. The objectives and content of education are discussed, as well as the arrangement and context of the learning content.

The improvement of education is considered in a broader context and is defined by the term *curriculum*. Curricular issues are addressed in the context of the following questions: *why education should take place, who should be educated, in what, how, when and under what conditions.*

The term curriculum was defined as an umbrella term by UNESCO as follows: *“Educational project that determines the plans, goals and specific objectives of educational activity; methods, means and activities to achieve the objectives; techniques and tools required for the assessment of the educational process”* (Seguin, 1991, p. 9).

After the turn of the millennium, a new school concept became the creative principle of the development and review of the curriculum: *“The school should be the place where children learn to solve problems that they encounter in everyday life, and where they are prepared for life under constant changes and for coping with changes”* (Walterová, E. et. al. 2004, p. 32).

Key competences in a European perspective

At the turn of the 21st century, a term that came to the forefront was *key competences*, which until then had been used inconsistently in educational sciences. In 1997 the Council of Europe defined five sets of key competences which schools should equip their learners with:

- Political and social competences such as the capacity to accept responsibilities, to participate in group decisions, to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner, and to play a part in running and improving democratic institutions.

- Competences relating to life in a multicultural society. In order to check the resurgence of racism and xenophobia and the development of a climate of intolerance, education must equip young people with intercultural competences such as accepting differences, respecting others and the capacity to live with people of other cultures, languages and religions.
- Competences relating to the mastery of oral and written communication, which are essential for work and social life to the point that those who lack them are henceforward threatened with social exclusion. In this same register of communication, the mastery of more than one language is taking on growing importance.
- Competences associated with the emergence of the information society. The mastery of these technologies, the understanding of their applications, strengths and weaknesses, and the capacity for critical judgement with regard to information disseminated by the mass media and advertisers.
- The capacity to learn throughout life as the basis of lifelong learning in both occupational contexts and individual and social life (www.vuppraha.cz).

In 2000, the requirements for the development of key competences were incorporated in the strategic objectives of the development of the European Community as part of the Lisbon process.

At its meeting in Lisbon on 23 and 24 March 2000, the European Council concluded that the key measure of Europe's response to globalization and transition to knowledge-based economies should be a European framework defining new basic skills acquired through lifelong learning, and emphasized that Europe's main asset are human resources. Since then, these conclusions have been regularly reformulated, for example at the meeting of the European Council in Brussels on 20 and 21 March 2003 and 22 and 23 March 2005, and in the renewed Lisbon Strategy approved in 2005.

The Commission Communication "Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality" and the subsequent Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 on lifelong learning identified the provision of *'the new basic skills'* as a priority, and stressed that *lifelong learning must cover learning from pre-school age to post-retirement age.* (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning)

The basic precondition for cooperation between all European stakeholders is to:

- Identify a specific number of precisely determined areas of general and specialised knowledge (mathematics, information science, languages, accounting, financing, management, etc.);
- Establish an assessment system for each area;
- Introduce new and more flexible methods of their recognition (www.vuppraha.cz).

In the context of the preschool curriculum, key competences are understood as *"a set of educational requirements including essential knowledge, skills and abilities universally applicable in common work and life situations; as a target category the competences present a substantial basis for determining the educational content and the educational conditions in educational documents."*

(Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education, referred to as FEP PE, 2018, p. 48)

As the concept of education changes, the role of the teacher also changes. His savings are no longer preliminary information, but develop competence. The so-called mobile access to education is a support for these goals. Changing the tasks of a teacher who has a different way of managing can lead to chaos, indiscipline or division of direct action. One of the components that supports the success of an interactive perspective is collaboration (earlier than the more common competitions). It is a specific kind of interaction. Create habits that accept common goals, accept the uniqueness of individuals for their chance, and build a sense of responsibility for results. (Provázková Stolinská, D., 2015)

Curricular reform in the Czech Republic – Framework educational programmes

The most important strategic document relating to curricular reform is the National Programme for the Development of Education in the Czech Republic. The document is based on *Resolution of the Government of the Czech Republic No. 277 of 7 April 1999*, following the policy statement of July 1998, which approved the main objectives of education policy. The adopted objectives became the basis for the *Conception of education and the development of the educational system in the Czech Republic*. Through this Conception, the Ministry of Education adhered to the principle that the development of education and all educational institutions and activities improving the level of national education should in the future be derived from the generally accepted education policy framework and clearly defined medium-term and long-term plans publicly announced in the form of a binding governmental document.

This strategic document is conceived as **a system project that formulates ideological bases, general plans, and developmental programmes that should be decisive for the development of the education system in a medium-term perspective**. The document was drafted on the basis of policy documents including analyses and assessment of Czech education during the previous five years performed by domestic as well as foreign professionals. The issues concerned with the development of the stages of the educational system were also commented on by social partners, representatives of civil society and various interest associations addressing the areas of education.

The following strategic educational objectives were formulated:

- Meet and induce educational needs of children, young people and adults.
- Achieve higher quality and functionality of education.
- Finish the system of activity evaluation.
- Develop the autonomy, innovative potential and facilities.
- In the context of tertiary education, support cooperation between educational institutions and other research and development organizations, and involvement in regional development.
- Support the transformation of the concept and performance of the teaching activity in all educational institutions, strengthen the social and professional position of educational and academic staff.
- Introduce the system of decentralized management of the educational sphere (White Paper, 2000, p. 19).

System of curricular documents In accordance with the principles of curricular policy formulated in the National Programme for the Development of Education in the Czech Republic (the White Paper) and stipulated in Act No. 561/2004 Coll., as last amended (the Education Act), a new system of curricular documents for the education of children, pupils and students usually from 2 to 19 years of age has been introduced in the educational system. The curricular documents are implemented on two levels, i.e. the **state and school level**.

In the system of curricular documents, the **state level** is represented by **Framework educational programmes** (referred to as FEP), which define the binding frameworks of education for individual stages of education. **The school level** is represented by **school educational programmes** (referred to as SEP), which govern education in schools.

Before we analyse in detail the current preschool curriculum and its implementation in education, its development will be outlined in the context of the process of institutionalization of preschool education in Czech kindergartens.

Overview of the development of the preschool curriculum – theoretical proposals to reform the objectives, content, methods and, forms of preschool care

Provázková Stolinská, D., Berčíková, A., Rašková, M. (2015)

The introduction of mandatory school attendance and the definition of the content of education for primary schools determined, albeit vaguely, the requirements for voluntary preschool establishments. The objective was preparation for compulsory school attendance in the sense of general child capability. Children were educated in terms of their physical, sensory, and mental fitness by appropriate means including play and controlled occupation. The legislative ministerial amendment of 1872 revised the preschool content and removed the trivium and especially “*school*” working methods, and introduced the first curriculum for pre-school establishments. The task of kindergartens was to provide child care and support and complement family upbringing in order to prepare the child for compulsory education in terms of mental, physical, and sensory fitness. Therefore, after 1927 the *Kindergarten educational programme* was prepared as a systematic document addressing preschool education. From a theoretical, practical, and methodological perspective, this was a developing idea that resembles today’s preschool curriculum. The aim was not to give kindergarten teachers a precise description of how they should work with children but to make them think about the principles and objectives, and the teachers themselves were supposed to devise their own activities in favour of children.

In 1930s **Jarníková** issued *Kindergarten educational programme: summary of educational resources and their use in child care* (1927). At that time, educational theory did not address questions concerning the learning content and programmes in kindergartens. Work in kindergartens was random, which caused considerable differences in quality. In 1938 ***Educational guidelines for kindergartens in the capital city of Prague*** were issued and also adopted by kindergartens outside Prague. Although this was only an eight-page document, it was a significant effort to develop a curriculum respecting the needs of kindergarten. The educational guidelines reflected the spirit of reform ideas of the First Czechoslovak Republic.

1945 was the start of intensive development of preschool education. In 1945 the ***Provisional work programme for kindergartens*** was published in an effort to follow the programme of 1938 developed under the influence of the reform pre-war period. In fact, this was the first national directive for kindergartens.

In 1948 the Act on unified schools was published that defined the tasks and objectives of preschool education. All preschool institutions were nationalized and kindergartens were the first stage and at the same time an organic part of the unified educational system. Preschool education was unified not only in terms of objectives but also the educational content and organization.

The work programme for kindergartens issued in 1948 was based on the requirements for unified education. In 1953, the ***Provisional educational guidelines for kindergartens*** were issued with an emphasis on moral, physical, music and art education, cooperation with the family, and playful methods and forms of work. The educational guidelines were the first binding standard for all Czechoslovak kindergartens. The educational guidelines defined the scope of knowledge, skills, and habits for two age groups: younger and older children. These were strictly defined educational requirements. The content of educational work was divided into several educational components. The didactic function was strengthened, which had a negative effect on the work of kindergartens.

In 1955, after two years of testing in practice and subsequent minor adjustments the document was issued as mandatory unified ***Educational guidelines for kindergartens***. Subsequently, methodological guidelines were added, the purpose of which was to help plan and achieve the objectives and facilitate daily activities. In 1958, ***Experimental guidelines for kindergartens*** were issued. In 1960, the final version of ***Educational work guidelines for kindergartens*** were issued. The guidelines generally defined the objectives and content of educational work. The guidelines were provided separately for two age groups (younger children 3-5 years, older children 5-6 years). Kindergarten teachers were supposed to work on the tasks defined in the guidelines throughout the whole day. Moreover, the tasks were supposed to be linked to each other. The educational content was structured into educational components. These included physical education, intellectual education, moral education, work education, and aesthetic education.

In 1963, ***Educational work guidelines for crèches and kindergartens*** were issued. This document was based on guidelines of 1958 and 1960. The educational content for kindergartens was traditionally structured into educational components and two age groups including children aged 3-5 years and 5-6 years. In 1967, ***Programme of educational work in crèches and kindergartens*** came into force. These were new directives governing the education of children from birth to six years of age. The core of the programme was the division into two groups: children until three years of age and children aged three to six years of age. The introduction of each section specified the respective age peculiarities and the relevant requirements for the given age group. The content was structured according to educational components. In an effort to provide a detailed guideline, the programme was overfilled with learning content. Kindergarten teachers had a document that tied them down and did not provide any conditions for creative work. In 1978, ***Programme of educational work for crèches and kindergartens*** was issued. Prior to its issue, the curriculum underwent a process

of preparation and verification between 1973 and 1976. The so-called preparatory sections were established in kindergartens as a form of preparation of 5 to 6-year-old children for school enrolment. Their objective was to prepare children who did not attend kindergarten. However, practical application suggested that some adjustments were required. In 1984, *Programme of educational work for crèches and kindergartens* was issued. Until 1988, ten new methodologies were incorporated in the programme (*Physical education in kindergarten, Cognitive development in kindergarten, Language education in kindergarten I, Language education in kindergarten II, Development of basic mathematical concepts, Moral education in kindergarten, Work education in kindergarten, Music education in kindergarten, Art education in an kindergarten, Literary education in kindergarten*).

Kindergarten teachers developed plans based on a detailed description of the learning content in the programme of educational work. The daily plans included detailed analyses of activities for the whole day. These plans usually specified ten or more specific tasks that kindergarten teachers had to accomplish. Kindergarten activities started to resemble school work. Methods used in kindergartens were predominantly passive and did not lead to sufficient child activation. All work was constantly affected by time pressure. Kindergartens began to lose space for child play. The above suggests that the kindergarten curriculum was subject to a number of amendments and changes.

1989 as the beginning of educational transformation – searching for new approaches

In 1989, the totalitarian regime collapsed, which brought freedom to the whole society, including freedom in education. The main strategic objectives included the following: depoliticization of education, acknowledgement of the civil right of children, pupils and students and their parents to a choice of educational path according to individual capabilities and interests, and the right to a selection of an appropriate school, abolition of the state monopoly on education and establishment of private and church kindergartens, increase in the number of public schools and qualitative diversity of educational opportunities, and establishment of a competitive environment in the area of education.

Right after 1989 kindergarten teachers refused to work according to the Programme of educational work for crèches and kindergartens (1984), because they felt that the programme had not provided adequate conditions for optimum development of preschool children. This programme was no longer a binding directive. Kindergartens started to follow their own educational programmes. And searched for inspiration in foreign countries. Kindergartens with traditional alternative programmes were established, for example those that followed the concept of Montessori or Waldorf education, but also some innovative programmes such as Step by Step or Health promoting curriculum.

Framework educational programme for preschool education

Between 1990 and 2001, there was no binding educational programme for kindergartens. Kindergartens only had guidelines that they followed. In 2001 the first version of the Framework educational programme for preschool education was

drafted. This was a preschool curriculum that completely differed from the document of 1983 (see Table 1).

Since 2007, this two-tier curriculum has been mandatory. The curriculum requires new competences from kindergarten teachers, relating especially to their ability to design educational work with respect to individual peculiarities of children and their interests and needs. However, this requires thorough knowledge and skills in the area of preschool education, educational diagnostics, and developmental psychology. This fact is currently emphasised by the legal requirement that defines compulsory preschool education (2018) for children one year prior to their school enrolment.

In the past, kindergarten teachers used to develop their plans according to precisely determined objectives and content. Today, only a framework is available according to which schools develop their school educational programmes; these are used by kindergarten teachers for the development of classroom plans with respect to specific children. (Provázková Stolinská, D., Berčíková, A., Rašková, M., 2015)

What research shows in the area of practical implementation of the preschool curriculum

The curricular research conducted by the authors of the present paper was inspired by Posner

Structural approaches that provide a perspective of the curriculum in terms of its internal arrangement;

1. Functional approaches that address the context of the curriculum and analyse what preceded the current curriculum and what followed.

Ad1/ At the time of verification of the new curriculum (2001-2007) only minor adjustments took place. After the enactment of the preschool curriculum (RVP PV) as the basic curricular document, it was subject to further analyses, which however did not respond sufficiently to the problems suggested by educational practice. The curriculum was said to be too “academic”. At present, there is a need for a deeper analysis of the curriculum that would reflect not only current educational trends but also practical needs.

Ad2/ The implementation of the curriculum has been monitored by means of research studies since its introduction. Some of the initial problems were related especially to a general understanding of the new concept in terms of its consistency including the state – school – classroom level. This especially affected the process of defining objectives. Another problematic area was the educational content, which needs to be designed and implemented according to children’s ordinary lives without artificial units. Currently, there are persistent problems with defining objectives on the classroom level. This issue is related to inadequate application of the methods of educational diagnostics. Universities try to respond in the context of training programmes aimed at this professional group but also cooperation with kindergartens on various projects.

It should be noted however that there are no comprehensive research studies focusing on the Czech preschool curriculum. Existing research studies addresses partial

problems relating rather to the *implemented and achieved curriculum* (Opravilová, Kropáčková, Šmelová, Syslová, Hornáčková, Burkovičová, Kořátková, etc.) Their contribution is significant because they represent a framework for kindergartens and a platform for further studies that can help revise the curriculum. However, there is no research on the *intended curriculum* in terms of its internal and external structure with an emphasis on the continuity in relation to FEP EE including a thorough analysis in the area of *coherence, structuring, and progression*.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic defined the priority objectives for 2019-2023, including the following: improving the quality of preschool education and elimination of postponement of school attendance, supporting maximum development of the potential of all children including the development of their creativity, which is directly related to a necessary review of the preschool curriculum. The intended curriculum will have to be subjected to a thorough analysis, which will result in adjustments in the context of educational trends reflecting the requirements of educational practice and especially the child personality. Healthy development of the child can only be supported by education in which the child is accepted, respecting the child's capabilities and needs and trying to understand the child's internal and external world, which is often for the child mysterious and at the same time full of surprises and expectations. The child requires not only the adult's attention and care, but especially love and understanding. Becoming familiar with all mysterious recesses of the child's soul will help us better understand the child and understand that this is the only way of developing a free personality (Šmelová, 2016).

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