



## DIFFICULTIES IN THE CZECH EDUCATION AND NEW APPROACHES TO THEIR SOLVING

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### Abstract

The Czech education has been criticised for overloading the students with too many facts and forced memorising of the subject matter. The pedagogical practice continues to be dominated by the teaching style relying on one-way communication from the teacher to students and on an external management that supports passive reception of presented knowledge. The school education thus ironically contributes to the fact that the school graduates lack the elementary key competences. Educational research underlines the need of a teaching dialogue and a broader use of activity and cooperation based methods. This is the direction we wish to follow in the development and implementation of the new methodology portfolio in the teacher training programmes.

### 1. Introduction – PRO-SCHOOL PROJECT

Institute of Education and Communication, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic is a participant in the international project with name "PROJECT BASED SCHOOL MANAGEMENT" (PRO-SCHOOL), nr. 142320-LLP-1-2008-1-TR-COMENIUS-CMP by the project coordinator Mehmet Emin BAKAY (Menderes İlçe Milli Eğitim Müdürlüğü Kasımpaşa Mah, Menderes-İzmir, Turkey). The aims of this project are to develop a school management methodology which is applicable to high schools in all partner countries and to improve the effectiveness of school according to demands of the knowledge based society. Major outputs will be a new methodology for school management based on common European values and experience, educational materials and an in-service training curriculum, project web page, several articles, a Comenius in-service training course and 6 national training sessions, 110 trained school managers on Project Based School Management and increased abilities of school managers. Project outputs will be prepared in 7 languages (English, Turkish, Romanian, Italian, Czech, Dutch and Greek).

Schools have to change in order to adapt themselves in changing environment and to bring up students for knowledge based society. However some schools are losing students because they are considered unsuccessful by parents and society. It is a well known fact that school managers who are capable of adapting schools into changing environment and who are equipped with good leadership characteristics are the main components of an effective school.



## **2. The situation in the Czech education**

In the Czech Republic later on doubts spread on whether the formal educational systems match the current requirements and whether their qualities facilitate their adjustment. They seem to suffer from a lack of flexibility, especially with respect to the acquisition of competences that would be useful in the future. Cognitive skills, work skills, the art of living together with others and life skills, the so called "four pillars of education" create four closely interrelated aspects of the same reality. The idea of multidimensional education through a person's life, i.e. the idea that follows from the legacy of outstanding pedagogical thinkers of various cultures of the past, was now, according to Vašutová (2005), readopted and there are efforts being exerted to implement it in the educational systems since it appears to be ever more necessary to bring the multidimensional education in the pedagogical practice.

Formal education has traditionally focused primarily on teaching of knowledge rather than on learning how to act. The remaining two pillars of education were mostly left to chance or considered to be a natural outcome of the first two pillars. But, according to Vašutová (2005), equal attention shall be paid to all the four "pillars of education" as long as the education is seen as a comprehensive experience, obtained all through one's life, as an experience related to both the knowledge and skills and the ability to apply them and at the same time to the personality of an individual and his/her inclusion in society.

## **3. The main problems and difficulties in the Czech Republic**

In the Czech pedagogical practice persist a number of problems cutting across the entire system of education. The Czech education has been criticized for too many facts in teaching and only memorizing of the subject matter. The students are introduced to an excessive sum of information, in a pre-processed form, and the schools seek to imbue the students with a solid system of knowledge which in the rapidly changing society (learning society) has rather a negative effect. The school education thus ironically contributes to the fact that the school graduates lack the elementary key competences. They leave the school equipped with a solid base of factual knowledge, but lacking the ability of critical analysis, having a poorer ability of independent decision making and expressing their own opinions, lacking in sufficient predisposition for team work and missing the ingrained urge for continuous self-education.

The teaching styles are based mainly on one-way communication from the teacher to students and on passive reception of presented knowledge. According to Miller (2000) it is not an exception that teachers resort to frontal teaching comprising only a whole-class presentation and dictation of notes to students which subsequently serve the students in their preparation, in which they do not use the technical textbooks, let alone any other sources of information. It has also been proven by surveys and evaluations carried out at training facilities providing the vocational subject teachers with pedagogical competences.

This situation was brought about by the past educational policy. A long-term priority of the Czech system of education in the field of secondary vocational education has been a one-sided training for future career, emphasizing the



educational content, whereas throughout the world ever more preference was given to the highest possible degree of autonomy of students in the acquisition of information, to group work, higher attractiveness of instruction, support for creativity, own opinions of students and individualization of instruction. Majority of the current trends in education highlights learning or teaching based on activities of learners, on mutual communication and activities. Learning by doing is deemed to be the most effective way of acquiring and using knowledge.

The findings of educational psychology explicitly prove the need to increase the autonomy in learning, the need of the shift from external management to self-regulation and self-construction. Educational research underlines the need of a teaching dialogue and a broader use of activity and cooperation based methods, i.e. methods enabling the student to create his own knowledge by means of his active involvement and communication, not only to receive the knowledge in a passive manner. It is also important in the course of education to create conditions for the development of students' abilities to communicate, cooperate and learn. There have been clear signs of a shift from behavioural models of authoritarian education to cognitive models of education, building on discovery, cooperative or collaborative learning.

#### **4. Curricular changes**

In February 2001 the Government of the Czech Republic adopted the National Programme for the Development of Education in the Czech Republic, often referred to as the "White Paper" . In line with the EU developmental trends in education it offers a basic system vision of education in the Czech Republic. It defines the main starting points, general objectives and developmental programmes crucial for the mid-term development of the educational system. Apart from other things the document declares the "transformation of the traditional school", with the main aim being to build firm foundations for lifelong learning. Students should acquire abilities and motivation to autonomously learn and work with information. This shift in the paradigm is all- embracing, covering the area of objectives and content of education, but particularly the methods and forms of education, the school climate and environment which should be based on openness, partnership and mutual respect. An important aspect is also the stress put on professionalism and responsibility of teaching staff who, apart from their expertise, are expected to be able to motivate, diagnose and efficiently manage the learning processes of students.

At present, the final stage of curricular reform, conceived in the Czech Republic as an internal transformation of schools, is under way. It resulted in the school educational programmes which have been developed by schools based on the framework educational programmes. The school educational programmes in secondary vocational education put an emphasis particularly on the following aspects:

- ⇒ preparedness of young people for lifelong learning (provision of tools for effective work with information, motivation, active involvement, creativity, positive value orientation),



- ⇒ employability of graduates throughout their life and promotion of entrepreneurial mindsets,
- ⇒ broad general and basic vocational educational,
- ⇒ target competences (key and vocational competences).

Such a concept of education does not build on rote learning (memorizing) of the largest possible quantity of facts. The role of the school should be the provision of a systematic structure of elementary concepts and relationships of each taught discipline as a basis for creation and development of the cognitive systems of students. Mutual links between the objectives, the content of education and target competences should be enhanced. The presence of practical activities in instruction should be substantially increased, interdisciplinary bonds, teaching in integrated units and new forms of instruction facilitating internal differentiation and individualization of education should be developed. It comprises especially the project teaching, based on active involvement and autonomy of students by which they are given an opportunity to get a deeper insight in the covered subject matter. It is essential to prepare the teacher methodologically for the new concept of curriculum and for the introduction of corresponding teaching methods and forms. Attention shall be paid also to the ability of self-reflection and diagnostic competences of teachers.

#### **5. Another Comenius project context**

The above referred to principles support the research conducted under Comenius 2.1. project too, focusing on taking the responsibility for one's own learning by the learner (Vidal, 2005). The learner will understand the importance of learning for his personal development, participates in his education, is motivated and mobilized. The system behind the concept relies on the strengthening of importance of learning process in the traditional teaching scheme: teacher – subject matter (knowledge) – student (learner).

The learning sub-system in the system of instruction assumes pivotal role. The teacher moves from the position of a mentor to the position of a facilitator who supports the learner in his work with information, when the information is received, mastered, integrated in the knowledge system, used and interpreted. The learner acquires information skills, under the teacher's guidance and masters the principles of rational work with information. The teacher monitors and facilitates the transformation of information into knowledge. The direct teaching undergoes fairly dramatic changes, especially with regard to teaching methods and forms that are more open to students, are activity oriented and have stronger elements of problem teaching. The focus of the above mentioned principles is analogous to the integrated forms of teaching of economic subjects. Also the work in practice firms, student companies and practice offices reckons with the autonomy of students, their independent processing of information and decision making without any direct involvement of the teacher.

Activity teaching methods and teaching integration help the learners get much better prepared for the period when they will have to receive and process the information on their own. In the course of direct teaching activities the team work, cooperative techniques and the project method, which is based on communication



between learners and their autonomous work, are employed. Where the referred to principles are properly employed in educational practice and under favourable conditions the competences of learners to work autonomously with information, their ability to make decisions and to act independently, their ability to deal with problems and be flexible in new situations should grow because the key competences are based on activities and skills arising there from, not only on memorizing and consolidating the knowledge.

### **6. New structure of target key competences**

The following structure of competences was established for the field of studies of M category (secondary education with the GCE - school leaving examination):

- ⇒ Competences for learning
- ⇒ Competences for problem solving
- ⇒ Communication competences
- ⇒ Personal and social competences
- ⇒ Civic competences and cultural awareness
- ⇒ Competences for employment and the conduct of business
- ⇒ Competences in mathematics
- ⇒ Competences to use information and communication technologies and to work with information.

An important complement to key competences is information literacy and education for entrepreneurship. Preparation for life in the information society requires the integration of the foundations of information science in the education system. School graduates should be able to define and satisfy their information needs and demands made on them by information- and knowledge-based society. Apart from vocational and key competences they should also achieve information literacy. That presupposes an acquisition of a range of information skills. Available information resources offer multiple classifications and interpretations of information skills. Education for entrepreneurship is seen as a purposeful effort of educators to shape the attitudes learners towards entrepreneurship and to create abilities which would help them successfully join the business community, i.e. especially creativity, independent critical thinking, responsibility, and willingness and ability to take reasonable risks. The referred to qualities are closely linked to key competences which are to be the results of education process.

### **7. Conclusion**

The objective of the selected introduced project activities is a innovation in the field of methodology of teaching, development and finalization of taxonomy of teaching methods, adequate to the current curricular theory in the Czech Republic, based on the target vocational and key competences. This new taxonomy should be reflected in undergraduate and postgraduate training of teachers of vocational subjects so that they avail of the methodology portfolio.

The methodology portfolio is seen as a set of teaching methods available to teachers who can combine the individual methods in real life instruction to make it activity oriented and to ensure the integral and harmonious development of target



competences of students. The above referred to problems and ideas concerning the desired changes have been discussed for quite some time, but any projections into practice are lacking. The issues of activity methods and integration of subject matter was investigated by numerous international research projects. Now it is necessary to build on them and to reflect this concept in training of teachers of vocational subjects and to identify an appropriate manner of their implementation in teaching practice.

The educational approaches of teachers are strongly affected by methodological stereotypes, the teachers often give preference to frontal teaching dominated by whole-class presentation and do not integrate the subject matter. If the activities of students are managed and guided in this way, problems emerge in the application of teaching methods based on autonomous work of students with information. Therefore, for methodological training of vocational subject teachers the following recommendations are made:

- ⇒ to strengthen the comprehensive training in the field of definition and implementation of pedagogical and educational objectives targeted at competences, to innovate the styles of teachers' work with instructional content and the development of up-to-date classroom management projects (specific and integrated models),
- ⇒ to put stress on drafting and use of curricular documents,
- ⇒ to enhance the skills necessary for the use of computers, the Internet and high tech educational technology,
- ⇒ a methodology portfolio – its creation and application in different teaching units,
- ⇒ as concerns the organizational forms of teaching to devote special attention to problem teaching and integrated forms of teaching,
- ⇒ to improve the facilitation skills – to support autonomous work of the learner with information sources and to promote work with information sources,
- ⇒ to work with cross-cutting topics: man and the world of work, citizen in a democratic society, man and environment, information and communication technologies,
- ⇒ methodology of conducting and analyzing evaluation activities and edumetry.

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