

RECENT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGES IN EDUCATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: A COMMENTARY

MARIE ERNESTOVÁ

English Department

University of Southern Bohemia

Czech Republic

EDITORS' NOTE: *Dr Ernestová taught at the State School of Foreign Languages, 1970 - 1988, before taking up her present position as Senior Lecturer at the University of Southern Bohemia where she teaches general linguistics, English morphology-syntax, English lexicography, theory and practice of Czech English, and translation.*

The Czech Republic is a Central European country with a remarkable cultural and educational heritage. The country has an extensive, varied musical tradition unbroken from its origins in ancient folk songs and church music to Martinu, and a prestigious theatre (matching that of New York or London), as well as an impressive film output. Scientists, such as Mendel and Freud, whose achievements have usually been attributed to the German nation, were actually born in the Czech Republic, as was the writer Franz Kafka. Though a small country, the Czech Republic has produced two Nobel Prize winners so far.

The beginnings of education in Czech territory are connected with church schools in the 9th and 10th century monasteries. The first lay schools are recorded from as early as the 13th century. A particularly important impulse to the development of education was the founding of Prague University by Czech King and Roman Emperor Charles IV in 1348. The university, which is the most ancient institution of higher learning in Central Europe and became a centre of both church and lay education, had a considerable influence on the development of education and, later, the process of national self-awareness. As far back as 1556, the first Latin gymnasium (school), with 120 students, was established at the Prague Jesuit college of Clementinum.

Compulsory six-year school attendance for reading, writing and arithmetic for all children was enacted more than 200 years ago (in 1774) and the first practical schools, precursors of later specialised secondary schools, began to arise in step with economic development and expansion of industrial production at the end of the 18th century. Compulsory eight-year school attendance for all children aged six to fourteen was introduced in 1869.

After the rise of the independent Czechoslovak state in 1918, schools underwent marked development. A network of common schools was completed, the number of secondary schools increased, and new universities came into existence. Before the Second World War, the Czechoslovak system of education ranked among the most advanced in the world. In recent years, however, and

especially since the 1970's, we have witnessed its apparent decline because the ruling ideology had such a narrow perception of education - as mere qualification for future professions - regarding people solely as labour power.

For almost 42 years the country was closely tied to the Eastern Bloc by strategic imperatives, economic compulsion and political organisation. Culturally, however, it endured as a repository of the humanist and democratic tradition. This tradition goes back to John Huss and the great 17th century philosopher, Jan Amos Comenius. This distinguished pedagogue, philosopher, theologian, and reformer, wrote 370 years ago: "We are all citizens of one world - what then hinders us from gathering in one community?"

I believe that no other nation in Central or Eastern Europe has such a distinguished education heritage. The Czech Republic has always been a country whose revered heroes were reformers, educators and philosophers, rather than conquerors or military leaders. Its history, traditions, outlook and leanings are essentially western. It was no accident of history that the first president of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 was a modern philosopher, Thomas Garigue Masaryk and, similarly, it is no accident of history that our present president is Vaclav Havel, a playwright and intellectual.

It would be wrong to say that socialism brought nothing but ills to the country:

- men and women enjoyed equal rights
- medical care was free
- expectant mothers were entitled to full medical care and to a paid maternity leave of 3 years
- monetary loans were provided for young couples to enable them to set up a family
- various facilities were provided to help parents take care of their families, such as an unprecedented extensive network of nursery schools and kindergartens, school clubs and school canteens. Travel was relatively inexpensive and commuters were entitled to reduced fares on trains and buses
- lunches in school and workplace cafeterias were subsidised by the state and/or the employers
- pensions of 50-60% of average salary were paid to men from age 60 and to women from 53 depending on the number of children they had raised
- books, theatres, cinemas and concerts were inexpensive and education at all levels was free
- the literacy rate was 99%.

Why then was education so devastated during the Communist era, and why is it seeking a new face now? In February 1948, a Communist *coup d'état* took place and from that date one educational reform followed another. Each reform was part of an overall plan to fashion a uniform school subordinated to Communist ideology and central control. Those reforms changed not only the content, methods, and forms of instruction but also traditional school names, the length of classes, and the length of compulsory school attendance. The changes embraced

the whole sphere of education, but all of them lacked that most important of precursors: a clear, coherent philosophy of education. The Communists did not accept the view that education is an expression of the belief that young and old alike have a right to inherit their culture and the right to understand and experience the culture of others. It is in order to re-establish this right that the recent changes in education, since the 1989 revolution, have been brought about.

Everything was usually left to the discretion of the creators of those reforms, but they usually looked to the political authorities for guidance. The concept was always markedly political and ideological. After this, specific teams were set up whose task was to work out the idea in some detail and implement it according to strict ideological guidelines. This is how school uniformity was established in 1948 and how we copied the Russian example by establishing '11-year schools' in 1953. However, I must point out that even some Soviet educationalists (such as Prof. Gontcharov) objected to the reforms because he recognised many valuable features of our existing education system which should have been retained. It seemed that every new Minister of Education brought about a new school reform.

The last reform, conceived in a similar way and introduced in 1976, made ten years of education compulsory for all. Of these, the first eight years were basic schooling. The remainder were spent in either a "gymnasium" (a specialised upper secondary academic institution), or in a school devoted to vocational training. In either case, students could spend an additional two years at the gymnasium or vocational school after completing their compulsory education. The system of centrally directed control and heavy ideological bias of the curriculum, combined with suppression of any criticism and expansion of subject matter within a uniform compulsory curriculum, essentially rendered positive change impossible and doomed partial adjustments to failure.

In recent years, but whilst we still lived under totalitarianism, various educational problems were discussed in our schools. However, discussion concentrated only on minor issues with the meaningful ones being avoided. For example, discussions focused on the pre-dominance of women teachers in schools but nobody dared to point out that teachers were constantly forced to lie to their pupils. Consequently, teachers often left schools in order to do something else, men more often than women. This was probably because men found it easier to make themselves useful in other areas of employment. All children were automatically expected to join the Young Pioneers' Organisation, where they would spend their free time some days after lessons. Education workers discussed the poor appeal of the Young Pioneers' Organisation for children but nobody could say openly that it was undesirable for all children to join a single organisation imposed on them from the top.

Teachers also discussed the absence of moral education in schools. Many of them felt that moral education should be delivered through lessons in religious education, but this option had very limited potential because the extent of religious education in schools was very restricted. Freedom of religion had been formally enshrined in the Constitution adopted in 1960, but hardly any parents dared to demand religious education for their children, knowing that a mere mention of the child's family background being tainted with religious feelings in his or her curriculum vitae might handicap his or her prospects of furthering their education.

Another example of futile debate was on the insufficient number of computers in schools. It would have been far more productive to have considered whether the children used them creatively. Yet again, a lot of fuss was made about children bringing clean drinking water to school with them in some regions of the country whereas environmental issues such as industrial pollution affecting drinking water were hardly ever discussed.

So discussions on improvements seldom centred on long-term educational objectives. Our schools did everything in the name of socialism, but in reality, they became servile tools for implementing all sorts of government campaigns. The State decreed that lessons were more important for a child than looking after sick parents, but it also decreed that it was more important for a child to leave lessons in order to celebrate the arrival of a state dignitary from another socialist country or to celebrate a political anniversary, or to harvest the hops and potatoes. The political slant given to a child's education was regarded as more important than the education itself. Thus it was out of the question for a child to go with his or her parents abroad for a long period of time if there was not a socialist school available at the destination. As a consequence, children of diplomats, businessmen, journalists, craftsmen or artists - that is to say children of those exceptionally lucky fellow citizens who "were allowed to leave the country" - either learned English, German or French at home from teachers who mostly had learned that particular foreign language at home too, or they went abroad with their parents where the only foreign language that they could learn was Russian.

People who wanted to achieve a higher academic status were prevented from doing so unless they had passed an examination in Marxist-Leninist ideology. My faculty employed a Czech-speaking Russian to run that course.

The move to politicise schools markedly strengthened in the 1970s, during the period of the so called "normalisation" which followed the Russian invasion of my country in August 1968. My elder colleagues told me several times that in a way it was a more difficult period for teachers than the 50s.

For the purpose of political instruction teachers at every school were divided into two groups, the Communist party members and the non-members. The situation at my school was rather amusing because out of 36 members of staff there were only three communists and the rest of us had no political affiliation, which was not uncommon. As we were a school with mostly afternoon and evening classes, one Tuesday morning every three weeks was set aside for that political instruction. The topics to be discussed were issued beforehand and allocated to individual teachers by name for fear that instead of the hoped for spontaneous discussion there might be silence. Attendance was absolutely compulsory. In the event of illness the topic had to be submitted in written form and a colleague had to read it for that absent member of staff. People usually approached this task very formally and copied out somebody else's ideas because they had very little to add or considered it too risky to add something original for fear that they might have been accused of 'revisionist inclinations'. The most difficult thing was to fulfil the task without saying anything at variance with one's own conscience. One of my colleagues, an elderly lady, would always forego her lunch after political instruction to go to the local swimming-pool saying she 'had to cleanse herself of the experience'!

People who have never experienced life in a totalitarian system of government should understand that ordinary teachers are not to be blamed for the state of affairs in education. Merely raising one's voice in protest against the established norms might have had grave and irreparable consequences for one's future professional career as well as personal life. I can still remember the time when Charter 77, a publication that documented the most sustained charter of human liberties in the history of Communist Europe, was released and all working people - teachers, schoolworkers, clerks, intellectuals and manual workers alike - were required to condemn it publicly. Public condemnation did not happen in my school, but when two teachers at another school were asked about the content of Charter 77 said that first they had to know what it was about before they could condemn it. Both of them were given notice, had to leave their school immediately, ending up in a quarry as manual workers. I was luckier. I did not put up my hand either when asked to show my disapproval of the document, but my headmistress pretended not to have noticed, perhaps because she needed me at school at that time and she wanted to save herself the embarrassment of having to explain to the authorities that she had allowed a rebel to work at her school.

Although our constitution proclaimed freedom of worship, everyday practice was completely different. Going to church regularly was regarded as being in sharp contradiction to the Marxist materialistic perception of the world and with what used to be called 'the mission of a socialist teacher'. It may have passed unnoticed in big cities which afford a certain anonymity, but in places where people know one another well, it was highly risky. I know of a colleague who's professional career was nearly destroyed just because he was reported to have attended a Catholic priest's funeral to represent his disabled parents.

There have been several events in my own teaching life which illustrate the difficulty of having a normal teacher-pupil relationship under the constant scrutiny of a headmistress who saw her position as having more to do with evangelising the Communist ideology than with the educational enlightenment of her students. Whilst I was a teacher at a foreign language school, catering for mature students, I always tried to prepare a 'special' lesson before the Christmas holidays every year because I knew the students appreciated it and they learned something interesting about life and customs in English-speaking countries which they could compare with ours. The headmistress often came to inspect that final lesson before Christmas because she was suspicious of what might be going on. So I would always speak about grammar while she was present and when she had had enough of it and had left - the moment the door clicked behind her - we converted the classroom into a Christmas party with traditional carols, fairy tales on slides and even festive food. I left that school many years ago but still my former students never fail to invite me for a reunion every year before Christmas. The same headmistress ordered us to leave out Chapter 47 from our English textbook because it contained a line "Mr. Vesely went to Britain at the invitation of the British Council". Even though it was an officially approved textbook and was recommended by the Ministry of Education in Prague, she did not like the mention of the British Council, claiming that it was an organisation which had collaborated with Nazi Germany and she simply ordered us to leave out the whole text of that lesson. I objected and told her that leaving the whole lesson out

would attract more attention than doing it in the normal way. My argument was waved aside as irrelevant. When, in 1991, the British Council opened its Resource Centre in my town, the same former headmistress abandoned her ideological convictions and immediately demanded to be listed as an Honorary Member!

Another sad feature of our former regime was that children learned to accept what they were told at home as being closer to the truth than what they were told at school. It was automatically assumed that the lesson texts would always contain certain ideological messages which would be assessed in the class register and marked in the teacher's preparation with a red pen. And so it happened that those who taught both English and Russian lived in a constant state of schizophrenia, i. e. they faced a continuing dichotomy: to always find something positive in the Russian lesson and something negative in the English lesson - at all costs!

Once I was teaching the so called "realia" (i.e. life and institutions) of the English-speaking countries and the lesson was supervised by the headmistress. The topic was "British Radio and Television". On the whole the lesson went very well and met all the political criteria. My only slip was to remark matter-of-factly that the BBC was broadcasting in 44 languages including Czech. So when the lesson was subsequently analysed, the main objection was that I had tried to glorify life in Great Britain! On a similar occasion the headmistress found out that I had used in class an article called 'Carnaby Street' which I had copied from an English magazine. I had used it in addition to my officially recommended textbook because the topic of the lesson was 'Clothes and Fashion' and the textbook was inadequate. However, the headmistress required me to formally account for my deviation from protocol. When I said the article contained more relevant vocabulary than the artificial text in the textbook, and that I used it only because I wanted to bring a bit of real life into our classroom, I was told that with 'my family background' (by which the headmistress was referring to my once relatively wealthy grandparents) I was not the right person to be able to assess whether a text was ideologically right or wrong. From that time I had to submit all my supplementary materials for inspection every week at least three days before I intended to use them!

Teachers were constantly overwhelmed with lots of administrative and often pointless tasks. They had to record all sorts of personal characteristics of their pupils, and gather data about their family backgrounds. Thus it was important to note whether they were born into a working class or an intellectual family. Teachers had to record their pupils' parents' political affiliations before 1945, between 1945 and 1948, after 1948, in 1968, after 1968 and at present. These data were then arranged into statistical surveys according to prescribed guidelines and regularly submitted to the education authorities governing a particular district or region. There was a list of important anniversaries to be recognised, and a list of recommendations the Communist Party Congress compiled every 4 or 5 years which had to percolate through the subject matter of the curriculum. Even if half of us had ignored those official instructions completely at our school we still had to submit a written paper describing how we had incorporated them into our lessons! No wonder that because of these stressful impositions a great many teachers failed to find the time and energy for creative work. In this centralised and rigidly directed system of education many things were dictated beforehand in

an immutable form. A teacher was regarded simply as a civil servant, a mere executor of party or state educational policy.

I could elaborate interminably on political interference and unpleasant confrontations, but that is incidental to the main objective of my paper. Let me outline briefly, therefore, what the socialist school was based upon. After the Communist *coup d' état* in February 1948, our educational system was abruptly isolated from the progressive educational reforms taking place in the rest of the western world. Compared with the standard achieved in the period between 1918 and 1939, which we call the First Republic, suddenly the educational values became stuck 'in the tram lines' of discipline and preparing people for work, in fact, was almost like education in the 19th century. In the educational system, discipline came first and foremost. The system was centralised, the Ministry of Education determined curricula and nominated textbooks and the objective was to produce a pliable, obedient labour force to serve the state economy.

In Charles Dickens's 'Hard Times', Mr. Gradgrind, a teacher, said: "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them". This is the principle on which so much was distorted and so much of educational value was omitted from our teaching during the Communist era, for

there are 'real facts' and there are 'political facts'.

The suppression of creativity soon affected even colleges and universities. Every student capable of independent thought - let alone the teachers - was subjected to scrutiny, harassment and the threat of reprisal. Again, I can offer myself as an example: I wrote an article on how to prepare collages from magazines to assist the learning of various grammatical forms and to encourage spontaneous conversation in my English classes. I managed to have it published in the English Teaching Forum in Washington in 1981 without having asked anybody's approval. I wanted to show that highly vivid sensory teaching facilitates the understanding of foreign language phenomena by applying the confrontation principle in language education. After about six months I was summoned to my superior's office where I was reprimanded and required to give a detailed explanation of my reasons for writing that article and publishing it in the West. I can still remember I said I wanted to share the joy I derived from teaching English with other people in the same or very similar situations. I did not lose my job, but the superior scolded me for attempting to endanger her position and my mail was censored thereafter. It is also a sad indictment of our education system that, as a teacher of English, when I wanted to purchase a book written in English I had to travel as far as Budapest or Dubrovnik.

Most teachers and education workers lived and laboured under a cloud of lies. After 1948, our history, culture and civilisation were subjected to radical and wide-spread 're-appraisal'. Our tradition of universal education and high literacy made it relatively easy for the Communists to reinterpret literature and manipulate what was taught in schools. The immortal words of some of our best loved and most admired authors and other national figures were replaced by meaningless myths conforming to political dogma - the original words so distorted that they were able to sail easily through political vetting procedures.

For example, Alois Jirasek, who wrote historical novels in the mould of Sir Walter Scott, was portrayed as a 'fighter for working class interests'. But thanks to the indelible historical memory of the nation these lies and distortions can now be remedied relatively soon. We do hope when we start rectifying the major faults, that the more favourable climate will allow the minor ones to correct themselves. All in our country who are able to read in, or translate from, foreign languages, particularly English, now have a tremendous responsibility to pass on to others their accumulated knowledge and experiences of intellectual developments outside the Czech Republic since our isolation. While only individual names were deleted from our country's rich cultural history, it is of much greater concern that the entire intellectual movement both in the West and in the East was concealed from us by the State for so many years. However, provided that our students, teachers and scientists are now able to get the most essential journals, books and grants from abroad, this void will disappear quickly too.

In order to reduce the social status of teachers the Communists considerably reduced their pay and rigidly controlled what they delivered. While this process was going on, working people were praised and the status of the intelligentsia was correspondingly depressed. In this way it was possible for a manual worker such as a mason, plumber, waiter, etc. to be paid more highly than any teacher.

The system of education was often run incompetently: the chief of the Education Authority in our region used to be a baker and his successor used to be a house-painter. It was difficult for us to find a common ground. The Communist Party only awarded executive positions to its most devoted and trusted members.

The perception of the teacher's role under the previous regime became rather narrow and stereotyped. The 'political factor' complicated the teachers' relations with their students, with their superiors, with the public as well as their relations with one another. The teachers, regardless of their university qualifications, were cast in the mould of irresponsible workers who could not be trusted enough to be able to perform their professional duties without systematic special guidance, random inspection and strict supervision.

The overall situation in society, the rigidly directed system of school management, the strict routine of school work with its politically determined curriculum, the retrogressive nature of educational development, the constant changes, the implications of non-compliance - all of these things provoked in some teachers a variety of physical, psychological and professional problems, such as:

- indifference towards other people and inability to empathise
- reserve, and fear of potential consequences
- preferring one's own opinion of events but reluctance to declare it
- refusing other people's opinions
- anxiety and stress
- being uneasy about new developments
- emotional imbalance
- arrogance towards weaker individuals
- exaggerated loyalty, sometimes even servility towards superiors
- fulfilling all orders and regulations even if they may be illogical
- obsession with unimportant details

- suspicion, a tendency to see underlying motives in everything
- assuming an air of being active and committed (when not!)
- fossilisation of thinking, lack of interest in changes of any kind.

Under the totalitarian system a new and potentially crippling disability evolved. We could call it "waning of one's inner motivation". Under great pressure from all these extraneous factors many teachers failed to enjoy their work, lost interest in improving their knowledge base and became depressed with what they had achieved; they became reluctant to look for new things, to be useful to other people, to enrich their students' lives, to impart their knowledge and experience to others. Under pressure from the system some teachers gave up their pedagogic responsibility, freedom and creativity. They shifted responsibility and judgement to "the top" and they reduced their function to that of merely fulfilling assigned tasks.

In spite of all these pressures upon the Czech teachers, there have always been some who did not succumb, but maintaining creativity, dignity and integrity meant constant confrontation with the totalitarian regime. Their students have always recognised their moral stand and have benefitted from it. There still remain many problems though, but the frustration is no longer institutionalised. Perhaps the most difficult thing to remedy will be the absence of an open dialogue between some teachers and their students, and introducing the concepts of spontaneity and critical comment.

I hope I have not sounded too negative about education under the former Communist regime because there is still much there upon which we can build our future. However, in our present attempts to change and improve our system of education we must carefully distinguish between things that are worth adopting from other countries and those that are not. In the past few months I have had an opportunity to get a deeper insight into the British education system. I have seen things that have impressed me very much, both good and not so good. I have seen schools with sophisticated equipment and computerised libraries from which students could retrieve information even during the lessons. I have experienced a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom. However, I have also seen the opposite extreme of what we now criticise in the former Communist system (compliance subservience and strict discipline), and what I have seen is no better. In some English classrooms, I have seen an utter lack of discipline, a lack of respect for the teacher, a lack of pride and interest on the part of the students in their own work, and such noise and chaos in the classroom that prevented anyone in the room from doing serious work. We might want a more relaxed atmosphere in the Czech classroom but we do not want things to go so far in the other direction.

In general, our Czech children have a better knowledge of world history and geography, are better behaved and show greater respect towards their teachers and to one another. These at least are the main impressions I received after observing some British classes. On the other hand, it would do our students good if we were able to teach them the art of open discussion in which the British students excel. It is really impressive how well they can defend their opinions even with limited factual knowledge to support it. During this time of transition in Czech education, when there are many people in my country condemning

everything from the past, we must be aware of the dangers of "throwing the baby out with the bath water", which could easily happen.

Our present system of education is based on a concept of 9 years of compulsory primary education leading to a number of subsequent educational options. Starting in 1989 school curricula were reassessed and rationalised and compulsory Russian lessons were abolished, thus relegating Russian to par with other foreign languages.

The monolith of uniform state education has been broken and opportunities opened up for the creation of private and church schools and multiple-grade gymnasia. The private schools charge fees and it is left to the parents' decision as to which type of school they choose to send their children to.

Schools are now free to provide alternative forms of education, and teachers can adjust curricula and opt to use alternative textbooks if they wish. In this way, it is no longer a single textbook that is used for a particular subject throughout the country at the same time. Consequently, the syllabi are not given so rigidly as in the past. The tightly laced institutionalised system of education directed from Prague is becoming looser, tolerating greater diversity, encouraging personal responsibility by teachers, and promoting individual inventiveness and creativity. Although statistics are available on education reform since 1989, they do not provide an exact picture because they were collated in 1992, when we were still one country together with Slovakia, called Czechoslovakia. Recently, a new law has considerably reinforced university autonomy and the powers of academic bodies. To supplement the network of universities at a time when large numbers of applicants are interested in enrolment after the removal of discriminatory political criteria from admission specifications, new universities have been created and more faculties added to those already in existence.

A very positive trend is that conditions for international cooperation have improved since November 1989. Being a member of the Council of Europe, my country now has opportunities to participate in international research projects in education, particularly in the European context. Informal cooperation is developing between teams and individuals. Lecturers from abroad bring not only help with teaching but also contribute to the cross-cultural experience. Similar improvements come from the availability of foreign textbooks, particularly language ones, which can now be used in our schools. Since 1990 the number of exchange agreements has increased rapidly. Having more opportunity to travel means that both our students and teachers obtain more practical experience in comparing education internationally. However, stringent financial restrictions and language barriers are still limiting factors. The societies that lived through the totalitarian systems of the 20th century look at possibilities for the development of human civilisation with great sensitivity. People who have been lost in a labyrinth are much more careful about the steps which they take on their way out. Totalitarianism and the supremacy of impersonal bureaucracies are an organic, if unfortunate, part of modern history. However, it has opened up new philosophical perspectives, which should not simply be discounted out of hand. The legacy of the Totalitarian State is also to highlight the critical importance of education in contemporary society and its vulnerability to manipulation at the political level. Civilisation itself will suffer if the independence of the education system is not maintained.