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Curriculum development in Slovakia

Summary: This article provides information about the two-level model of curriculum development within the school system of the Slovak Republic. This involves the State and the School Curriculum. Both curricula are briefly characterised here. Further attention is given to school principals who serve as important links responsible for the development and quality of the curriculum of a specific school.

Key words: Reform, Act on Education, development, curriculum, State Curriculum, School Curriculum, school principal

Streszczenie: Artykuł zawiera informacje na temat dwupoziomowego modelu rozwoju programów nauczania w systemie szkolnym Republiki Słowackiej. Model ten obejmuje program państwowy oraz szkolny. Oba programy zostały pokrótce scharakteryzowane poniżej. W dalszej części należy zwrócić również uwagę na role dyrektorów placówek edukacyjnych, którzy odpowiedzialni są za kształtowanie i rozwój oraz jakość nauczania w konkretnych szkołach.

Słowa kluczowe: reforma, ustawa o edukacji, rozwój, program nauczania, program państwowy, program szkolny, dyrektor szkoły

Introduction

The year 2008 was significant in terms of contemporary education in Slovakia. Change has been the key word accompanying the political, economic, cultural and social life in Slovakia since 1989, when this Central European country also started the road to actual democracy. By passing of the new Act on Educa-

tion, declared ideas and thoughts about the need for change in the Slovak education took a specific form. The change was to take place in terms of the nature of education characterised as a transmission of final knowledge to students in an isolated way within individual subjects without developing also non-cognitive functions of students. Even though this was not an image that one should generalise, education in the majority of schools in Slovakia looked like this. Among relevant objections from educational as well as non-educational community were comments saying that students had good knowledge, but were unable to use them properly, that students had problems with providing arguments, explaining, reasoning or problem solving. The new legislation was to be an outcome of the effort to respond to current requirements, conditions and needs of the society. It was to introduce also several significant reform changes in the school system in reaction to these problems.

In May 2008, members of the National Council of the Slovak Republic passed the mentioned Act on Education and in June 2008 the State Curriculum. According to the mentioned Act on Education, the State Curriculum is hierarchically the highest education project in terms of its aims and programs. It expresses aims of the education policy of the country, main democratic and humanistic values and principles which serve as the basis for the national education in Slovakia. According to the above-mentioned law, education in the Slovak Republic is based on principles such as:

- Principle of free education;
- Principle of equal access to education;
- Principle of prohibiting all forms of discrimination and above all segregation;
- Principle of equality and unity of education in the educational process;
- Principle of life-long education;
- Principle of integration of the educational system into the European education area;
- Principle of balanced development of all aspects of child's personality;
- Principle of equality of education acquired in state, church and private schools;
- Principle of prohibiting the use of any forms of physical punishments and sanctions;

State Curriculum

The State Curriculum defines the general aims of schools and developed key competences with the ambition to provide for balanced cultivation of personality of students. It also provides a curricular framework, a model of graduates and education standards for the individual stages of education. It promotes a complex approach in developing student abilities to build knowledge, to act, to evaluate, to communicate as well as to get along at a given stage of education. It is the starting point and a binding document for developing an individual school curriculum reflecting specific regional conditions and needs as well as possibilities of a given school.

The most important change in functioning of schools in Slovakia resulting from the reform – that is after passing of the mentioned Act on Education, was the so called curricular transformation of schools. Its raft draft was provided in the mentioned act and its specific details were described by the State Curricula designed for individual stages of schools. State Curricula are seen as pedagogic documents created on the state level that are guiding for the process of School Curriculum development. They were created in accord with the International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 97.

The concept of State Curriculum is based on three key elements that can be considered as innovative with regards to the historical context of Slovak education. One of them is the already described two-level model of curriculum development including the State and the School Curriculum. Another is represented by the revision of the curriculum itself and its transformation through a new conceptual model – definition of education areas. The third pillar has been the modification of the specific school stage graduate's profile based on the concept of key competences derived from the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for life-long learning (2006).

The greatest challenge for schools and for the whole education system in Slovakia has been the two-level curriculum. This model of curriculum development means it is made up of the State and the School Curriculum. It had been decided that schools would take up a new role from one day to another. Responsibilities resulting from it were perceived in many cases as a great pressure.

School Curriculum

School Curriculum follows the requirements stipulated by the Act on Education, by the State Curriculum and is based on the aims and profiling of the specific school. By developing a School Curriculum, the school takes up a part of the responsibility for decisions in terms of aims and curriculum.

School Curriculum must respect:

- Developmental capacities of children at certain age;
- Facility, material, technical and human resources capacities of a specific school;
- Focus and profiling of the school,

If a school educates integrated children with special education needs, it creates conditions for them through individual curricula or through curricula designed for schools educating children with special education needs. School curriculum may also be an international curriculum approved and realised based on a written approval of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and is in accordance with the principles and aims of education as defined by the valid Act on Education.

School Curriculum is designed to serve multiple stakeholders. First of all to children, students that are the target group of the relevant stage of education. It is created in their interest and it must therefore respect above all their needs, abilities and other developmental dispositions. It is clear that it also serves the specific school that developed it. School principal as well as school teachers apply their professional knowledge, ideas, suggestions and available recommendations in the area of education as well as their creative personal potential in the process of its development.

The School Curriculum serves as the basis for everyday educational activity of a teacher. All parents should become familiar with it as they are also its significant stakeholders. It offers them a complex of information which they as legal representatives of their children are legitimately entitled to. They should find in the document answers to their usual questions, e.g. what the school emphasises in education of their children, what style of education is used, what is the extended offer of school in terms of student extracurricular activities, how does the school care about children with special education needs or about physically handicapped children, talented children and children from socially dis-

dvantaged environments. The School Curriculum should be matter of fact, comprehensible, informal, clear and written in a way that parents - non-educators understand it too.

The founder of the relevant type of school also works with the School Curriculum. It is a source of additional information about the given school and school facility. The founder can ask the principal to provide the School Curriculum for approval.

The compliance of the School Curriculum with the State Curriculum, with the aims and principles of education stipulated in the Act on Education is controlled by the State School Inspection. Logically, it is another stakeholder of the School Curriculum that cannot be left out. This highest state control institution also fulfils the role of quality control in terms of material and technical conditions and their effective use in schools and school facilities. It also checks the following of generally binding and internal regulations and decisions regarding education. In its work it specifically focuses on monitoring and evaluating the quality of education, the process of education itself and its results, as well as the professionalism of instruction. When it comes to human resources policy of schools, inspectors are most interested in ensuring further education of teachers as well as fulfilling qualification requirements of school principals and school facility directors.

The School Curriculum can also be a suitable material for institutions of further education that graduates go on to study, they can also be of interest to professional as well as general public. School Curriculum can play an important role in school promotion. The school should profile itself not only based on its own potential, but also according to requirements and interest of students and their parents in the region. It should thus flexibly respond to specific situation in a wider school community and the school should provide a truly public service.

In accordance with the Act on Education, the School Curriculum is the main school document according to which education in school is carried out according to the given act. It is issued by the school principal after its negotiation in the education council of school and the school board. It is published on an available place. School Curriculum contains:

- a) Title of the curriculum;
- b) Definition of the aims and mission of education;

- c) Degree of education achieved by passing the school curriculum or its complex part;
- d) Focus of the school itself;
- e) Length of studies and form of education;
- f) Instruction curricula;
- g) Instruction plan;
- h) Language of instruction;
- i) Manner, conditions for graduation and issuing of a document confirming earned degree of education;
- j) Human resources;
- k) Material and technical conditions and facilities;
- l) Conditions to ensure safety and health protection at school;
- m) Internal system of control and evaluation of children and students;
- n) Internal system of control and evaluation of school employees;
- o) Requirements in terms of in-service training of educators and professional staff;

School Principal and Heads in School Curriculum Development

The main responsibility for School Curriculum development lies with the school principal. In the long-term process of its development though, cooperation of the whole team of school teachers is inevitable. The principle should suggest a suitable concept, real plan, with the help of which new quality of education can be achieved. Schools can request help from various educational entities when developing the School Curriculum. The principal should be able to enforce the common interest as the interest of the whole teaching staff, of all those interested, and therefore leading such team work is of huge importance.

When it comes to School Curriculum development, certain changes were introduced by the passed Act on Education as well as related legislation, specifically in terms of duties and competences of school principals. According to these regulations (act on state administration and self-government in school system) the school principals are responsible for:

- a) Following of the State Curricula designed for the school they manage;
- b) Developing and following of the School Curriculum;

- c) Developing and following of the annual plan of in-service training of teachers;
- d) Following of generally binding legal regulations related to the scope of school or school facility activities;
- e) Annual evaluation of teaching and professional staff;
- f) Level of education work of school or school facility;
- g) Budget, financing and effective use of financial resources designed to ensure activities of school or school facility;
- h) Proper management of assets administered or owned by school or school facility;

School principals get into a new position of managers developing own curriculum for schools they are responsible for. It is clear that it is a new aspect of their activity requiring a broader view of the whole scope of specific school, naturally also standard managerial skills. In the conditions of Slovakia, school principals have most often been teachers ensuring instruction in selected subjects - the pedagogical emphasis still has a tradition here. Only in unique cases is a person without pedagogical background in a school leadership position. It has been shown that in terms of high-quality and successful school – it is irrelevant if the principal is a teacher or a lawyer or an economist. Decisive is if this person is a good or a bad manager. Unquestionably, responsibility of the principal for its school is extraordinary.

When developing the School Curriculum, the principal must realise as first that the school expresses through the School Curriculum its aims, its focus and strategies through which it wants to achieve its aims. The development of the School Curriculum is an opportunity for the school to promote itself, but on the other hand also a great responsibility for ensuring quality education. However, it is clear that the quality of schools will always depend on the quality and motivation of individual teachers and that the curriculum itself will not guarantee a good outcome. Principals must also ensure team work on the School Curriculum which will result in such a description and presentation of important information regarding possibilities of education that the public will understand based on it the position and portfolio of given school.

School Curriculum Development also requires fulfilment of certain conditions already in the preparatory phase. At the beginning it is inevitable to create a realisation team in which competences for individual activities are set and ta-

sks and responsibilities divided, as well as deadlines for their fulfilment defined. If the coordinator of team is not the principal, it needs to be someone from within this group. Another condition is that all members know completely the State Curriculum and are mutually informed about their opinions on it. To be aware of the strong and weak points of the school through realised SWOT analysis is a basis for developing one's own strategy and vision of the school. The profile of the school graduate is the last stage of the preparatory phase. It concludes thinking about, briefly said:

- What school are we like;
- What school would we like to be;
- What graduate would we like to have;
- How can we achieve our aims;

Probably the most difficult step in School Curriculum Development lies in the ability of the realisation team to transform a concept of a certain idea into an education document. This is related to one of the basic ideas of the reform including the thesis that a student is the subject of education. In the ideal case then it is about creating educational environment supporting the student. It is the students who like going to school, who look forward to interesting methods and forms of instruction and know that they can express their own opinion, know that they are individuals that are equal members of the community in which they have an active role. Teachers on the other hand understand these students and see them as their partners, guide them in their learning and in acquiring new knowledge and skills, communicate with them, develop a feeling of togetherness in them, promote their responsibility and tolerance to others, stress mutual cooperation.

School Curriculum must also embed rules of students' evaluation and self-evaluation of the school. Self-evaluation as a process inevitable for improving the quality of education in a school, for evaluating each teacher's share in fulfilling common aims, is a new phenomenon in schools in Slovakia. The first analyses show that schools manage the task to write their school curricula variously. Apart from patience and support of schools it is also necessary to prepare and discuss also about mechanisms for ensuring quality, starting with control and inspection through supervision and motivation. Those too are continuing challenges of the mentioned changes.

Conclusion

Two-level model of curriculum development has had probably the greatest impact on specific performance of schools and their management. By passing of the Act on Education, teachers got the possibility to participate in the process of curriculum development. It brought an opportunity to freely formulate and express one's own opinions, knowledge, experiences and views of the most suitable form of education in school. Together with all educators and colleagues and while accepting conditions and profiling of their school, they became authors of a complex school curriculum. To achieve the final effect it was necessary to choose suitable strategies, thought-through concept transformed into mutual working with students, parents and other stakeholders. The question which remains is if teachers really perceived it as a manifestation of educational autonomy of schools and as a democratic expression of their own needs and possibilities. Above all - methodological unpreparedness of supporting institutions as well as teachers themselves and the short amount of time to verify state prescribed curriculum were among arguments that often suggested the contrary. It is worth thinking about to what extent can this ultimately endanger the core building block of quality of education in Slovakia. The situation so far seems to indicate that there was not enough support to cover their needs mainly in terms of methodological guidelines and in-service training of school principals, school leaders and teachers provided in the process of school curriculum development. They helped each other most of all through on-going communication and information sharing about problems, barriers and mainly about the way of how to overcome them.

Literature

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