

Iveta Kovalčíková, Juraj Kresila, Monika Miňová

University of Presov in Presov, Slovak Republic

Selected Aspects of Early Childhood Education and Primary Education in the Slovak Republic during the Period of Transformation of the Slovak Education System

Introduction: the phenomenon of education reform

Education reform involves a process of gradual changes ranging from the most general to those that take place at the level of the individual classroom; and these changes are not merely one-off events. Complex educational reform is the result of a combination of a number of different forces. As K. D. Bene and R. Chin state (in Bennis et al., 1985), even a well formulated education programme is usually interpreted properly by only a limited number of its final recipients (teachers); one of the effects of this is the often inappropriate and ineffective implementation of the goals of educational reform at both the school and classroom levels. Hence it is necessary to differentiate between the *rhetoric of purpose* and the *actual results* of purposes fulfilled. In creating a compact and cohesive system of education, it is necessary that the experts charged with this task can support their arguments for such a programme both with a theoretical outline of its most general aims and educational ideals relating to key social values, as well as with a more specific description of its practice in the classroom.

Education reform is largely dependent on the political climate of a given country. The state is traditionally responsible for the quality of education provided, and with Slovakia's entry into the EU, the overall state and standard of education in the country are regularly monitored within

the framework of various pan-European initiatives that focus on raising the quality of education. In its *Report on the Quality of School Education in Europe* of May 2000 the European Commission (2002) highlights five challenges for education in Europe, one of which is an appeal to decentralize education. This springs from the belief that the subject that is most affected by the decisions being made (i.e. the school) should be able to manage its own affairs. By joining the EU, Slovakia is to a certain extent obliged to respond to the recommendations and challenges presented by the European education reform agenda. In Slovakia, experts viewed the question of the need for educational reform largely in terms of the need to shake up a system that had been unchanged for decades. Politically, education was not an issue which was uppermost in people's minds, and it was only in the second half of the first decade of the new millennium that the situation started to change.

In this article we concentrate on an analysis of the processes of transformation in Slovak schools, mostly in terms of the transformation of the curriculum and education context in early childhood education and in primary schools.

1. Historical determinants of the current reform processes in Slovak schools

As stated by Kosova and Porubsky (2011b), today's Slovak education system is the result of a process of historical development that began with the industrial revolution in the 18th century, and which was influenced by German pedagogic thinking, and took place within the legislative framework of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Certain factors characterize today's system, which, because of their stability, serve as a barrier to real systematic reform.

1. *The centralizing tendencies in educational policies and the efforts to facilitate state control* in educational processes. One aspect of this is that the teacher is perceived as a 'clerk' who follows instructions from the state.

2. *The tradition of informational teaching* which is based on encyclopaedic learning in an effort to acquire all the knowledge that a person needs to know through a didactic model of the world (textbooks). As the former educational policy was based on centralization and state control, this tradition became a means for the centre to influence and control the material taught at schools.

3. *Limited social awareness of the value of education.* Social egalitarianism and the non-existence of a labour market meant that in many cases simply having a diploma was the only criterion governing whether a person was employed or not, irrespective of the actual quality of his/her education. These three traditions are still very deeply rooted in the Slovak education system and conspire to hold back real systemic reform (see Kosová, Porubský, 2012).

In the last century, the Slovak schools system underwent several reform processes, the effects of which are now determining the course and form of today's transformation.

The first act in reforming Slovak schools in the postwar state was the statute of the Slovak National Council of September 1944, which led to state control of schools – democratization does not mean only access to education for the widest number of people but also democratization of the system of teaching and the culture (Srogoň et al., 1986, p. 376).

In 1948, Slovak society experienced radical change, part of which was the legal and organizational unification of the school system by decree. This law related to all levels and types of school, integrating them into one school system and giving them all a common educational aim. The unified school system aimed to remove the two-tieredness in education and granted free access to the highest levels of education. Schools were vertically divided into individual levels of education, with each level being based upon the intellectual and physiological development of pupils.

In the 1950s, the school system in Slovakia was strongly centralized, with the decision-making powers in a given department being transferred – as in other government departments – away from the executive

and parliament to the central organ of the ruling political party. In 1951 a resolution of the central party organ was passed for secondary and national schools which monopolized the production of textbooks. A law passed in 1953 regarding the school system and the education of teachers led to an expansion of the network of early childhood facilities (Eurybase, 2008, p. 2).

In 1976, there was a debate within central party structures over the *Proposal for further development of the Czechoslovak educational system*. This development was to be achieved through the modernization of the content and methods of work and the tying-in of the educational process with the needs of manufacturing. The model of an open school was accentuated, where newly verified scientific information could be taught, and which encouraged the independent work of pupils based on new information (SNC, 1983).

The new political system in the 1990s created space for extensive school reform. Below we give an overview of the basic conceptual documents that underpinned the ideological reform movement in Slovakia, and which naturally influenced the development of early childhood and primary education. Analysis of these documents demonstrates that changing the education system is one of the most complicated parts of social transformation because it shows a relatively residual tendency.

After gaining independence in 1993, the Slovak government's first attempt at conceiving holistic reform of the education system was a Ministry of Education project called *Konštantín (Constantine) – A National Programme of Teaching and Education* (Constantine Project, 1994). This document attempted to define the strategic interests of the state in the area of *teaching and education*². The strategic aims highlighted in the document reflected the task education had to perform in the transformation from a totalitarian society to a civil and democratic one. The new system was to be characterized by the openness and flexibility that is typical of

² The two terms *výchova a vzdelávanie* (teaching and education) were perceived in the document as two aspects of the same process and were, in the later parts of the document, replaced by the common term *edukácia* (Projekt Konštantín, 1994, p. 3).

education in pluralist democracies and which should respect the abilities and needs of each child. When looking at ways of achieving this proposed education system, the authors of the document referred in section 4 to guidelines contained in internationally binding documents (Konštantín – 2nd stage, 1994, p. 7).

For the first time in Slovakia, the need to create a *framework curriculum* and attendant standards arose. In section 5 of the document, which presented a pedagogic view of teacher-pupil interaction, the term *the pupil's educational needs* is introduced, the fulfilment of which is the responsibility of the education system. As a response to the call to ensure the pupil's integrity of personality, the authors offer *creative–humanistic teaching and education*. After the change of government in 1994, however, the project was not implemented.

A further executive step in the field of education reform came with a government memorandum in 1998, which made a commitment to a long-term conception of educational development and a new school law that would support this idea. The conception was submitted at the end of 1999 and given the working title *Millennium* (1999).

The Millennium project proposed the following systemic changes:

a/ *to change the philosophy of education from a traditional one to one which was more creative and humanistic, integrating into it a pragmatic school philosophy where the school is a source of general education and a humanistic approach is adopted to learning;*

b/ *to change the content of education (curricular transformation) reducing the amount of unnecessary information and replacing it with knowledge that is necessary for life and key competences for which new syllabi, textbooks and modern study materials are needed,* (Millennium, 1999, p. 16).

As well as a change in philosophy and educational content, the authors also propose a change in the methods and technology of education: *moving away from directive, undemocratic, autocratic teaching methods to less directive ones, involving democracy, subsidiariness, heuristics, alternative methods, and multimedia technology.*

The need to create a two-tier model of educational content is again emphasized. *The state curriculum should contain general goals of education, basic subject matter, binding target requirements for pupils – standards, means of verifying fulfilment of standards and model education programmes* (Millennium, 1999, p. 20).

In December 2001 the government passed the *National Education Programme for Slovakia*, which was an extension of the *Millennium* project and which was intended to serve as a springboard for new schools legislation. Kosova and Porubsky (2011, p. 40) state, however, that “the fulfilment of the programme did not gain wide political support and the transformation got bogged down at the level of minor amendments to the law on schools. This had a negative effect on the micro level of the education system. Disappointed teachers decided to resign in their struggle with state administration and innovative processes started to show signs of stagnation. Neither Slovakia joining the OECD (2000) nor the European Union (2004) reversed this trend despite bringing new impulses for change in society at large. This manifested itself in education policy in the efforts to Europeanize and modernize the education system, as well by a new curricular policy which aimed to build a two-tier and participative curricular model focussing on the development of key competences”.

In February 2006 a new School Bill drafted by the right-wing coalition was submitted to parliament. Because of a change in government in the same year, however, the bill was not passed. In April 2007, a curricular council was appointed by the education minister, the main task of which was to coordinate school reform in Slovakia. In 2008, the Slovak state authorities finally started work on creating the legislative conditions for systemic reform (the passing of a new School Act), which was mainly the result of a discussion about Slovakia’s indifferent results in the OECD’s international testing of reading skills, natural science and mathematical numeracy (PIRLS, PISA, TIMSS). In May 2008, a government Education Bill was passed in parliament; and in June the *State Educational Programme*, which defined the general aims of schools, and the framework for the content of education and standards for various levels of education, was

also passed. These steps meant that the practical implementation of education reform in Slovakia finally began after more than a decade.

The new Schools Act came into effect on 1 September 2008 and led to a number of key changes. Here we choose those related to early childhood and primary education.

- *Educational levels (early childhood and primary) were brought into line with the ISCED³ international classification.*
- *A two-tier educational programme model was implemented for all levels of education in which the state would determine the compulsory part of the content [...] through state education programmes and each school's specialization would be defined through the school's own education programmes.*
- *In early childhood education, which on the day of the act coming into force became a part of the school system, the educational process is regulated in the same way. See Zimenová, Havrilová (2011) for more details.*

2. A two-tier curriculum – the way to decentralize the education system in Slovakia

State education programme. The state education programme (StEP) for schools is, according to the new Schools Act, an overarching educational project that incorporates a framework model of a school-leaver, guidelines for teaching plans for each level of education and guidelines for syllabi. It presents the first guidelines for a two-tier, participative model of school management and expresses the main principles and goals of the state's educational policy as well as of the democratic and humanistic

³ <<http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-standard-classification-of-education.aspx>>, 15th April 2012.

values upon which national education is founded. It defines the general aims of schools in terms of key competences, in that it seeks a balanced development of pupils' personalities and the framework content of education. [...]. It is a starting point and a binding document for the creation of a school's individual education programme⁴. The state education programme is divided into levels according to the ISCED classification.

School education programme. The school education programme (SchEP) offers an elective component of education to the teaching plan of the school. This component can be fulfilled within the school education programme of the school and represents the second tier in the participative model of management. It gives schools the opportunity to specialize and cater to the needs and interests of their pupils, and is formulated by the school in compliance with the valid and binding state education programme. The school's programme reflects its function and specialization, as well as the strategy its management has chosen together with the regional and local community. It reflects the needs and opportunities of pupils and staff and is an indicator of the quality of education which the school offers. All the teaching staff are involved in its design, using the elective lessons to create their own teaching plan⁵.

The general reaction to the introduction of the state education programme and two-tier curriculum. In the Slovak context, the new schools act marks a step towards the decentralization of the traditionally prescriptive and centrally managed education system. For a long time, the academic community had been subjected to reforms of the content of schooling; what the new law brought in, however, was systemic change, primarily in terms of a teacher's new competences with s/he becoming a co-author of curricular inputs. This therefore resulted in a sense of in-

⁴ <<http://www.statpedu.sk/sk/Statny-vzdelavaci-program/Statny-vzdelavaci-program-pre-1-stupen-zakladnych-skol-ISCED-1/Uvod.alej>>, 15 April 2012.

⁵ <<http://www.statpedu.sk/sk/Statny-vzdelavaci-program/Statny-vzdelavaci-program-pre-1-stupen-zakladnych-skol-ISCED-1/Uvod.alej>>, 15 April 2012.

security for some teachers as they felt unprepared to take on such a new professional role. The absence of a real call for the restructuring of Slovak schools from within the schools themselves is, in our view, one of the main reasons for the sceptical and negative attitude of the teaching community towards the new law: teachers have simply not been prepared to take on the role of co-designers of their school's education programmes. Teacher training in this country does not include this area of expertise.

The level of deregulation in centralized school management and the level of autonomy of individual primary schools. Traditionally in Slovakia, the material taught (the so-called knowledge corpus) was defined centrally, far from the classroom or school. The clearly defined boundaries between different subjects, together with the centrally prescribed tempo of study and the pedagogic role of the teacher, was typical of Slovak education culture for decades. One variable which was exclusively in the hands of the teacher was classification (assessing the performance of the pupil with a grade). The introduction of the new education law has now given Slovak schools new powers: more freedom to choose their pupils and to organize and timetable their educational content. The majority of a school's educational content, however, still remains centrally controlled.

We consider the enactment of the new schools act in Slovakia to be the start of a series of efforts to qualitatively change the centralized and directly managed schools system. A pluralistic, two-tier model of education is an appropriate means of providing social cohesion and consensus in an advanced democratic society. However, unlike countries which have a two-tier model of education (such as the UK), the initiative to delegate certain decision-making powers to the schools in Slovakia came not from the teachers themselves, but from the government. In addressing such issues, the state is bound by EU recommendations. In the minds of the central authorities, questions of reforming the education system have often dealt only with the need to reduce the outsized volume of teaching matter. By dividing the content of education into two tiers, the state surrendered some of its power to prescribe curricular inputs. This lost

power should, however, be compensated by the state's increased power to monitor education outputs, for which it has now taken responsibility. For the two-tier model to become functional, it was necessary to create a more objective means of assessing academic performance – one based on certain criteria. The Slovak education system has no tradition of standardizing academic outputs; as well as modernizing marking methods; it would therefore also be necessary to create a mechanism by which external institutions could participate alongside schools in assessing such outputs.

3. Selected aspects of the transformation of early childhood education in Slovakia since 1993

A Description of early childhood education in Slovakia. According to Act no. 245/2008 Coll. on Schooling and Education (the Schools Act), „*materská škola*“ (MŠ)⁶ – a nursery school is *the first stage in the school system* in Slovakia. This school encourages the child's personal development in various ways: socio-emotional, intellectual, physical, moral, aesthetic, the development of their abilities and skills, and creates the conditions for their future education. It prepares them for life in society in harmony with their individual and age-determined features. Although the nursery school – the founder of which may be the state, the church or a private person – has become a part of the school system in Slovakia, attendance to such schools is not compulsory by law. Nursery schools can contain one-class or multiple classes, and can be attached to a primary school. Care and education is provided according to the two-tier education programme made up of the state and the school education programme. The state education programme defines general educational goals at the nursery school level as well as the key competences of a child of an early age. The framework content of education defined by law is given in Table 1.

⁶ Pre-school education facility for early childhood education in Slovak Republic.

**Table 1. The structure of the State Education Programme
ISCED 0 – early childhood education**

Thematic fields	Educational areas	Subareas	Crossover themes	Competences
I am	perceptual-motoric	motoric	personal and social development	psychomotoric
People	cognitive	healthcare	protection of life and health	personal (intrapersonal)
Nature	social-emotional	natural science	transport education – learning road traffic safety	social (interpersonal)
Culture		mathematic-logical	medial	communicative
		linguistic	multicultural education	cognitive
		communicative	fostering creativity	learning
		ethical	development of pre-reading skills and literacy in general	informational
		geographic	information-communication technology and development of digital literacy	
		informational		
		artistic-expressive		
practical				

The state education programme (StEP) is the first stage in the two-tier model of education programmes: 1. it is the highest valid curricular (target-programme); 2. it defines common requirements (goals) for all children attending a facility so that after their completion anywhere in Slovakia (even after a change of address), they can begin their primary education at primary school; 3. it sets basic minimum levels of competences which the state guarantees through early childhood education and through the professionalism of its teachers, fulfilling qualification requirements in accordance with the law. The StEP is set for the standard population of children. Nursery schools can offer educational options within the school education programme which go beyond those set by

the state education standards. We expect these to depend directly on the orientation of the school, the specifics of the region and the local conditions.

The aims of education. The main aim of early childhood education in Slovakia is to achieve an optimal perceptual-motoric, cognitive and emotional-social level in early childhood as a basis of preparation for school education.

The aims of early childhood education are:

- to fulfill the child's need for social contact with their peers,
- to facilitate the child's easy adaptation to a new environment (to nursery and primary school),
- to develop a positive attitude in the child to knowledge and learning through games,
- to purposely and systematically develop, in a creative atmosphere, the personality of the child in terms of psychomotor learning and the acquisition of knowledge, and in social, emotional, and moral areas,
- to apply and protect the rights of a child in cooperation with their family, the school administrator and other institutions (upholding the ethical principle of cooperation) while respecting the needs of the child,
- to gain the trust of parents in individual educational counselling and to direct their attention to their child's positive behaviour; if necessary to refer the parents to other specialists (paediatrician, speech therapist, psychologist etc.).

Education standard for ISCED 0. Act no. 245/2008 Coll. on Schooling and Education (the Schools Act) § 9 states that educational standards are divided into content and performance standards. In *content standards* we can find the defined content of education. Content standards are binding and define the teacher's structure of activities. Content standards are defined areas of development of elementary competences. *Performance*

standards are conceived as target requirements which a child should achieve at the end of their early childhood period as an output of early childhood education.

Structure and organization of education. A child gains an early childhood education upon completing the final year of the education programme at nursery school. A child usually finishes early childhood education at the end of the school year in which they have their sixth birthday by August 31 and are of a school-going age. A child may finish their early childhood education before reaching the age of six if, according to the relevant educational advisory service and a children's general practitioner, the child is fit and able to begin compulsory schooling (early school attendance is at the request of the parents). Nursery schools issue a certificate to the child to prove that they have completed their early childhood education. Those children admitted to nursery school are predominantly from three to six years old; if the school has the capacity, however, it may also admit children who are only two years old. Children who are already five, and children who have had their compulsory school attendance deferred, are given priority. As a rule, children of the same age are grouped together in one class. The Schools Act sets the maximum number of children for each class at nursery school as follows:

- a) 20 in a class for three to four-year old children,
- b) 21 in a class for four to five-year old children,
- c) 22 in a class for five to six-year old children,
- d) 21 in a class for three to six-year old children.

Early childhood education is provided in the following forms:

- a. day-long education for a number of years;
- b. separate classes for children who have to begin compulsory school attendance the following year;
- c. separate classes for children who have to begin compulsory school attendance the following year with their legal guardians

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- present during the school day (with the agreement of the head of the nursery school) in combination with home preparation of the children;
 - d. half-day schooling in the form of four or five lessons daily in the morning or in the afternoon;
 - e. individual early childhood education.

Curriculum. The historical development of the education programmes for the nursery school level has been influenced by the historical and political context in which the programmes have evolved, as well as by the relevant school legislation. Since the foundation of Czechoslovakia (1918), 12 programmes governing early childhood education have been issued. *The programme of schooling and education in nursery schools* (valid during the 1999 – 2008 period), which was the forerunner to the current curricular framework – has been broken down into *educational components*. The content of schooling and education has been differentiated in its difficulty according to the age of the children. There has also been a move away from the dominant directive position of the teacher, to pedagogic approaches that focus on the child. The organization of the day gradually switches from frontal (teacher-fronted) activities to group activities carried out through didactic activities. At the start of the millennium, both nursery school education theorists and in-service teachers started to call for the following: the elaboration of a new education programme at NS; removal of the binding internal differentiation of content of schooling and education according to the age of the child; the creation of greater space for respecting the developmental potential and abilities of children; removing the system of educational components; creating greater space for respecting the specific features of certain nursery schools. For the first time in the history of education programmes for nursery schools, the current state education programme does not have areas (nor subordinate curricular concepts like aims and standards) structured according to age categories.

Problems of early childhood education in Slovakia in the context of educational reform. In terms of creating and implementing a two-tier curricu-

lum for ISCED 0, specifically regarding the process of formulating school education programmes, the management of nursery schools has shown greater flexibility than their counterparts at higher levels of the schools system. Equally teachers at nursery schools have welcomed the opportunity to be involved in creating the curriculum. Ongoing problems with the evaluation of the outputs of the education process, which are present at even the nursery school level, are a legacy of the Slovak curricular tradition, which has emphasized defined inputs and compulsory contents. Teachers at nursery schools, however, represent a group of professionals for whom creativity and flexibility are an internally felt need and are a natural part of their daily work. Openness to new trends in education creates space in early childhood education in the Slovak Republic for the unimpeded implementation of school reform.

4. Selected aspects of the transformation of primary education in Slovakia

Description of primary education in Slovakia. Compulsory school attendance in Slovakia begins with the child starting primary (elementary) school. The first level (ISCED 1) is joined with the second level (ISCED 2) to form one organizational unit; together the two levels make up a primary school in SR. The first four years of primary school represent schooling within the ISCED 1 framework; this first level is not subdivided. In Slovakia pupils are grouped together in classes according to their age – classes are homogeneous in terms of age and are coeducational. One teacher is responsible for each class at primary school and teaches all subjects. At the primary level of education in Slovakia, state schools are prevalent though there are also church schools and private schools. Education at the primary level in Slovakia is controlled by the state education programme in which normative requirements for pupils are set using educational standards. The content of primary education is divided into 7 educational areas that are derived from the definition of the content of education and of key competences. **The state programme uses the**

term *crossover themes*⁷. These overlap with educational areas, connecting various fields of basic learning and contributing to the complexity of the pupils' education. They can be taught within the framework of individual subjects, as separate courses or even as elective subjects.

Table 2. Basic (core) subjects in educational areas at primary school – ISCED 1 with Slovak language teaching⁸

EDUCATIONAL AREA	SUBJECTS
LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION	SLOVAK LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE FIRST FOREIGN LANGUAGE
MATHEMATICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY	MATHEMATICS INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
NATURE AND SOCIETY	NATURAL SCIENCE GEOGRAPHY
PEOPLE AND VALUES	ETHICAL EDUCATION / RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
PEOPLE AND THE WORLD OF WORK	PRACTICAL AND WORK SKILLS
ARTS AND CULTURE	MUSIC / FINE ART
HEALTH AND MOVEMENT	PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Table 3. Crossover themes⁹

CROSSOVER THEMES (THEMES)
PERSONAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION
MEDIA EDUCATION
MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION
TRANSPORT EDUCATION – ROAD TRAFFIC SAFETY EDUCATION
LIFE AND HEALTH PROTECTION
REGIONAL EDUCATION AND TRADITIONAL FOLK CULTURE
CREATING A PROJECT AND PRESENTATION SKILLS

⁷ Slovak equivalent – „prierezové témy“.

⁸ <<http://www.statpedu.sk/sk/Statny-vzdelavaci-program/Statny-vzdelavaci-program-pre-1-stupen-zakladnychskol-ISCED-1/Uvod.alej>>, 15 April 2012.

⁹ <<http://www.statpedu.sk/sk/Statny-vzdelavaci-program/Statny-vzdelavaci-program-pre-1-stupen-zakladnychskol-ISCED-1/Uvod.alej>>, 15 April 2012.

The framework teaching plan is a document which sets time allocations for subjects taught. These are defined by the Schools Act for the whole level of education; dividing the time allocations across the different years is the task of the school, as is dividing the subject matter according to year, though the average age is taken into consideration. The content of education is based on education standards. The original framework teaching plans of 2008 have been replaced by a new framework of teaching plans that have been in force since 1 September 2011.

The education standard for ISCED 1 is made of two parts: a content standard and an attainment standard. *The content part* of the education standard determines the minimum content of education, its main purpose being to unify, coordinate or guarantee the compatibility of minimum educational content at all schools. The content part is made up of subject matter which can be learnt and understood by all pupils. This subject matter is divided into four categories: *factual knowledge* – the basic element of knowing; information pupils must know if they are to be familiar with a certain discipline; *conceptual knowledge* – knowing the mutual relationships between facts learnt and understood; *procedural knowledge* – how to make or do something, methods of testing; *metacognitive knowledge* – cognition and thinking in general. The attainment part of the education standard is a set of tasks to be performed that will determine the level at which the pupil can master or attain the minimum (basic) subject matter which is taught¹⁰.

Problems of primary education in Slovakia. Questions related to the development of primary education in Slovakia during this period of transformation are analysed in the following sources: Kosová, Porubský (2011a, 2011b); Zimenová, Havrilová (2011). Kosová, Porubský (2011a) stress the fact that from the beginning, the transformation of primary education has been accompanied by certain restrictions, many of which have their roots in political decisions that were made earlier.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

A) *The structure and organization of education.* In the mid 1990s, primary education was extended from eight years to nine years. Despite objections from pedagogic experts and psychologists, an extra year was added to the lower secondary level to create a final ninth year. Slovakia is thus one of only a few countries with a lower secondary stage of education that is longer than its primary stage. The length of primary education in Slovakia (4 years) is not ideal; the transition from the 4th to the 5th year is, according to teachers at both levels, a problematic one with the 5th year being especially demanding for pupils. The first level remained a four-year period despite the fact that the introduction of a five-year primary level was contained in the government and parliament's approved national educational programme of 2001.

B) *Curriculum.* Curricular politics at the first level of primary school remained essentially unchanged up until the Schools Act of 2008, and was managed by central teaching plans and syllabi with a mandatory number of lessons taught per week. From 2003 there were five ministry approved curricular variants for the first level (the basic curriculum, one with extra natural sciences, two with additional foreign language teaching and one with IT) and 16 for schools with pupils from national minorities. In Slovakia there were a small number of alternative schools approved after a long experimental period of testing ... "The unclear situation indicated the inappropriacy of central decisions about curricula being made for every class and school and also showed that the time was right to introduce a compulsory state curriculum alongside an elective school one" (Kosová, Porubský, 2011a, p. 41). The new Schools Act of 2008 introduced for the the first level of school two types of state education programme: one for schools which taught in the Slovak language and one for schools which taught in national minority languages. The teaching syllabi of all subjects were gradually upgraded from 1993 to 2007, together with the education standards for individual subjects, which was first implemented in 1999. The standards mainly mirrored the syllabus content, though a few also described the abilities and skills which pupils had to achieve. They were, however, criticized for being 'maximalistic', as

they were overloaded with detail, memory orientated, isolated and limiting in terms of the integration of subject, and tending to ignore the development of competences (see Kosova, Porubsky, 2011a).

C) Aims of primary education. The main programme aims of primary education (currently formulated in the state education programme) are the development of key faculties in pupils. The European reference framework of key competences has influenced the selection of these, and has been elaborated in response to the values and needs of our school system. The key competences have a cross-subject character and overlap with one another. A pupil completing primary education should have acquired the following key competences:

- social communication competence,
- the competence to apply basic mathematical thinking and basic cognitive skills in the area of science and technology,
- competence in IT and communications technology,
- the competence to learn,
- the competence to solve problems,
- personal, social and civil competences,
- the competence to perceive and understand culture and express oneself using cultural language.¹¹

Hauser (2008, p. 7–9) states, however, that although the Slovak educational framework for primary schools clearly describes the profile of a primary school leaver, it is not clear whether the set of competences laid out is intended to be the standard and mandatory minimum for pupils or merely a guideline. Given the tradition here of seeing a class as a relatively homogeneous group of individuals, it is clear that together with the use of predominantly frontal methods of teaching, issues of differentiation and an individual approach to pupils need to be further

¹¹ <<http://www.statpedu.sk/sk/Statny-vzdelavaci-program/Statny-vzdelavaci-program-pre-1-stupen-zakladnychskol-ISCED-1/Uvod.alej>>, 15 April 2012.

addressed in Slovak education. The monolithically formulated curricular requirements may become a barrier to achieving realistic educational goals with weaker pupils or those with learning difficulties.

After passing of the new Schools Act, we consider the most important issue in primary education to be the development of the curriculum on two levels. It is necessary at the state education level to initiate change in the existing approach to pupil assessment; it will then be necessary to upgrade education standards by specifying the exact descriptors for the levels of pupil outputs. At the school level, it will be necessary to devote attention into developing the professional competences of teachers in order to ensure that they are able to fulfil the demands of the new law and plan their teaching programmes accordingly. This can only be done, however, by changing the conception of a teacher's professional preparation and by offering retraining courses to in-service teachers.

Conclusion

This article outlines the processes and effects of school reform and the curricular transformation in Slovakia in the context of the post-1989 social and economic changes, and describes the basic problems of moving away from a centrally managed schools model that has been in existence for several decades, to one which is partially decentralized. We do not in general paint an idealized picture of school reform, which includes the areas of early childhood and primary education, but instead show how it has been a process of trial and error influenced by a lack of experience of systematic and complex education reform in the Slovak context. As Swing, Schriever and Orivel state (2000), abolition of a uniform school system and a centralized educational administrative structure are the most visible aspects of the transformation of the school system in the former socialist countries. Marxist theory is rooted in the ideal of a socially homogenized society which is centrally managed by the state, a uniform school system being seen as an essential tool in maintaining this degree of homogeneity. Within the processes of the current educa-

tion reforms in the post-socialist countries, the principle of uniformity is being replaced by one of plurality and differentiation. As Zimenová and Havrilová emphasize (2011), the effectiveness of a two-tier model for projecting the general content of education, with the basic education framework being defined on the state level (state education programmes) and their specific form and application at the school level (as school education programmes) depends above all on a division of responsibility across both tiers. According to these authors, an ideal division of competences between the state and schools has not been achieved at the regional level; they also criticize the state education programme for making the basic subject matter too binding. The number of compulsory subjects and the time allocations for them have led to in-service teachers to complain about the lack of time, and about how it limits their autonomy in the education process. Another problem is the fact that teachers lack the basic support mechanisms which would make the process of curricular transformation easier for them. "In the school system there is an absence of inspiring new didactic models, of new teaching materials and textbooks reacting to the new requirements, of good quality methodical help and programmes of further education, as well as of material and financial provision fulfilling the real needs of schools during the different phases of the transformation process. [...] Both the time scale for implementing the reform and the easily misinterpreted autonomy of the schools were reflected in the unreasonable demands being placed upon teachers. The space between the state education programme and the school programmes should have been bridged with adequate support for teachers; instead, however, a vacuum has built up creating an illusion of freedom for schools" (Zimenová, Havrilová, 2011, p. 10).

Despite the fact that the focus of this article has been on connections between the development of early childhood and primary education in Slovakia, it has not been possible to avoid some chronological analysis of general reform trends. Early childhood and primary education have been affected by all aspects of the reform processes in Slovakia. This has made it impossible to isolate one filter of the transformation period that has operated as a determinant of the current state of ISCED 0

and ISCED 1 in SR. In the early phases of the post-communist transformation we were witnesses to a certain pendulum effect, i.e. automatic negation of the previous regime without fully conceived approaches leading to systematic change. Early childhood and primary education have not been spared these somewhat improvised efforts of reform, leading to a decline in institutionalized early childhood education and the closure of nursery schools as well as to more positive trends in the search for and demonstration of new pedagogic thinking in enthusiastic teachers. 'Mini-reform' has been carried out at the classroom level, though the teacher-reformer has often been misunderstood by their own colleagues as well as by the school headteacher. Nearly 20 years elapsed before the passing of the new Schools Act created space for teachers to devise their own methods; but this came at a time when once-enthusiastic teachers were approaching the age of retirement. New teachers today are not so marked by the post-revolutionary enthusiasm for change as their older colleagues once were, and a large number of teachers have burnt-out at the peak of their careers or surrendered during the endless battle with the ever-changing reform proposals, proposals which, alas, have never really taught the teachers how such changes can be successfully implemented.

Undoubtedly both Slovak early childhood and primary education bear the signs of reform, typically in the form of 'wanting and feeling the need to change'. Sufficient space remains, however, for upgrading and improving the quality of education in schools, the outlines for which have been indicated in this article.

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Abstract

The aim of this contribution is to assess selected aspects of the development of early childhood education and primary education in the Slovak Republic (SR) during the last twenty years in the context of the process of the transformation of the Slovak education system. Our aim is to emphasise: 1. the formation of a legislative framework for education reforms in SR; and 2. the development of a curriculum for early childhood and primary education. The contribution outlines various mechanisms for curricular transformation which are dependent on mutual configurations and the characteristic components of this difficult process. In the contribution we name the basic factors determining the conditions for the preparation, the implementation process and the assessment of results of education reform in early childhood and primary education. At the end of the article we offer suggestions which we feel could lead to the successful modification or further implementation of education reform in the Slovak Republic.