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On the Need of Innovation in Teacher Training

Abstract

Slovak education is still undergoing transformation changes. The changes are influenced by objective and subjective factors, provoking several questions, e.g. the ones concerning new objectives resulting from the need to improve the training of future teachers. Training of teachers for the first level of elementary schools of extraordinary importance has become. It is expected to reflect several current tasks connected with, for example, the migration of people in Europe as well as with the preparation for language competence.

Key words: *school transformation, external transformation of education, new tasks in teacher training, teacher's individual concept of teaching, knowledge integration, immigrant education, languages teaching, parents requirements.*

Introduction

Since 1989 our education has been under going changes which we have got used to calling the “transformation of education”. It is neither a simple, nor a short-term process. In addition to the questions of organisation, it involves analysable pedagogical issues. Thus, one may examine, for example, the content of education with regard to social requirements, methods and forms of educational work at schools, greater involvement of parents in the work of the school, etc. To prove that the change in education is not a simple issue, one may point to the fact that since 1989 there have been several materials outlining further directions and tasks of education in the new, changed conditions – “The Renewal and Development of Our Educational System up to 2000” (Uč. noviny, 3/1991), “Educational Changes in

Slovakia up to 2000” (Uč. noviny č. 24/1992), “Project Konštantín – A National Programme of Education.” (Uč. noviny č. 9/1994).

The present starting points for educational change in Slovakia and its tasks for the next 20 years can be found in the document referred to as “Millennium.” (Zelina, M., 2001). The implementation of many topics and requirements formulated in the above-mentioned documents has been rather slow. This is not caused, however, by a rejection of the school or society. The reasons are rather: **objective** – for example, economic possibilities of the country as well as residual impact of all the past; and **subjective** – for example, the readiness and willingness of all educational staff to introduce progressive trends into education, including its management.

1. Factors influencing educational change

The paper is concerned with teacher training, which is considered to be one of the most significant and permanent problems of educational changes. The optimisation of teacher training must be focused on the future, it must be manifested in concrete efforts to meet the tasks and requirements connected with current change or transformation of education as well as to promptly and relevantly change the existing state in the concrete conditions. Modification must ensure that future teachers are thoroughly prepared for multilateral creative work in the future, because good and quality work of the teacher and the school has an influence on the quality and dynamism of the development of society and its individuals. Naturally, this influence is not manifested immediately or directly. Its results can be seen only after several years when the generation of graduates enters society. Taking the above perspective, our paper does not deal with the content and organisation of teachers’ study, but it is focused on some current tasks resulting from current times.

General, though even today very deeply rooted, opinions see the school as an institution whose task is to mediate knowledge to students and to develop certain skills in them. Knowledge and skills were considered a certain “key” leading to or ensuring success in an individual’s life. The gradual and accelerating development of science and technology was revealing more and more the contradictions between school and society, putting ever more demands on school graduates. It was gradually becoming clear that what is decisive for society and production is not a material education, but a capable and creative person. Whether (or how) the school has managed to come to terms with this contradiction would require quite an extensive analysis, which would consequently make us aware of the fact that the school even today does not fulfil everything it is expected to be doing by society. There are

many reasons which cause the school's falling behind. Let us mention some of them: possibilities of schools based on the strength of the economy (the number of teachers, classrooms, types of schools, material and technological equipment of schools, financial support of teachers, etc.), educational content not keeping pace with scientific and technological inventions (their transfer into schools requires certain time, but science and technology are in permanent progress), biological-psychological possibilities of pupils – students are also limiting (the school would be able, even willing to give students as much as possible, but it is not possible with regard to the above-mentioned possibilities), and, last but not least, one can mention considerable “vitality” of the tradition at schools. Here we would like to point to the fact that they are not just our specific problems, or the shortcomings of just our schools. Each of the sketched out problems may be illustrated by evidence from pedagogical practice, showing that also schools in other countries are troubled by similar problems. D. Glines the American pedagogical futurologist, has characterised the situation in American education by the following statement: “We have more modern buildings and data-projectors and, today, computers. But student keep coming to schools and enter their classrooms where they sit and read, count and learn history in the groups of thirty. At certain time of our history, this system may have been very good. But it is not so good, any more, to hold for a long time. What is necessary now is to make the main change in the institutions called schools – in a very short time... Changes in schools and the society remind me very much of the moving of folding seats onboard the Titanic. We have to stop to constantly move the deck-chairs and, instead, alter the course of the Titanic, to avoid icebergs which, as it seems, stand in our way.” (Bjerstedt, A., Glines, D., 1988, p. 116.)

2. On the didactic and educational work of the school and the teacher

The transformation of education is not, and cannot be, only its external reconstruction – different arrangement of individual educational levels, a change in the length of school attendance, new type of schools, etc. The transformation of education is, among other things, a significant change of teachers' attitudes to teaching and educating, a change, or a different approach to the pupil in the process; the pupil becomes a significant subject of the whole educational activity. It is an **internal transformation of the school**, affecting the work of every teacher.

Quite often, especially in recent years, the following questions have been posed: What was the teacher training like? What should it be like and what should be

stressed first of all? Are we aware of the fact that the question cannot be unequivocally and exhaustively answered?

From time to time we are confronted, either in literature or in the discussions about teacher training, with questions whether, and if yes then to what extent, to pay attention to pedagogical and psychological training and to the so-called specialised training, that is, to the preparation within a subject which they are expected to be teaching. It is common knowledge that in concrete work we scarcely use activating methods of education, for there still lingers an encyclopaedic character of teaching, not enough attention is paid to the diagnostic aspect of education, the still frequently emphasised humanistic approach to education does not provoke appropriate reflection in the work of many schools. One could mention more of such problematic issues, bringing up the following questions: What is the cause of this not very satisfactory situation? Why do even the young, beginner teachers, prefer such methods and forms of work by which they themselves were educated, and why do they not introduce and develop what they were prepared for during their study?

Answers to these questions are usually found in various influences. The most frequently mentioned ones are, for example, influence and effect of a team which the beginner teacher enters; the questions of financial stimulation and motivation recut quite often in recent years (being a schoolteacher is not motivating enough), too many pupils in classrooms (this complaint has become relatively frequent, though in many schools, especially the village ones, the number of pupils is optimal and the quality of work does not significantly differ from those with a higher number of pupils); a certain share in the situation can be attributed to the feminisation of schools, etc.

It would not be correct to say that the above mentioned influences are insignificant. We think, however, that evaluating the work of schools and identifying the above-mentioned influences, we somehow tend to forget about the analysis of the teacher training. In addition to the external influences and factors mentioned above, it will be necessary to more fundamentally and consistently innovate their preparation. Here one needs to mention the words of a Swedish educator T. Husén who claims that "Production forms of the school are at a pre-industrial level. The mediation of knowledge and the instilling of new habits is done, in essence, in such a way as 50 or 100 years ago, irrespectively of all progressive movements in the innovation of methodology and rationalisation of teaching" (Turčenko, V. N., 1977).

After such a brief overview of problems one expects an answer to the question of what the innovation of the training of future teachers should lie in.

It is certain that first comes a well designed curriculum, made up proportionally of all the subjects which form a profile of a future teacher, both from the theoretic-

cal and practical point of view. Present higher education institutions, or even their departments, enjoy a considerable autonomy, which creates good conditions to optimally design their plans, or to continually innovate and optimise them. The optimisation, however, must draw on longitudinal research into the training of a future teacher as well as on educational practice of schools. The main objective should be that the subjects of the curriculum have a consistent influence on the profile of a future teacher. It seems that conceiving the content of training, we should listen to teachers' voices, and, last but not least, recommendations and suggestions of students themselves. A symbiosis of these approaches could contribute, if not to the removal, at least to the easing of a long lasting contradiction between theory and practical teaching skills.

With regard to teacher training we would like to mention one more aspect which so far has not been given enough attention. It is the creation of one's own, individual conception of teaching. To avoid misunderstanding, it must be emphasised that a teacher acquires his/her own conception only after several years of teaching. It would be incorrect, if not naïve, to expect a graduate to leave a higher education institution with his/her own consistent conception of teaching. However what is essential in this respect is the fact that the study offers enough possibilities to at least approximate one's own conception. A more profound analysis will show that views calling for paying more attention to these questions are more frequent. What is so often emphasised with regard to teaching, for example a pupil's own creative development, respecting the individuality, etc., is still insufficiently respected and applied in teacher training. The extent to what our statement that "we prefer to form the teacher in accordance with our ideas" is relevant may be left open, since it is a question which has to be answered by every teacher, department or faculty.

Current or innovative tendencies in teacher training, in addition to the said issues, include, for example, the following tasks: to teach students to work with the content of education – nowadays the content is not understood as a prescribed norm; to lead them to real, humanistic understanding of education – the present school does not use directive methods of education, but concentrates on possibilities, abilities, interests, as well as needs of a student, etc.; to teach students to link teaching with a pupils' emotionality, to lead a student to prepare for a flexible approach to work – we will see more and more alternative approaches to teaching, in a way forcing the teacher not only to accept them, but to adapt them to his/her own conditions as well.

Efforts to change the school cannot focus only on its educational part, but they have to include upbringing as well. With regard to the transformation of all our society and its gradual change into a democratic and pluralistic one, addressing

the questions of upbringing, including the preparation of teachers for a good upbringing, is much more demanding than teaching.

New conditions which have to be addressed in the work of the school and which have to be reflected in the teacher training include: new philosophical sources setting a direction and focus of upbringing, respecting and developing pluralistic approaches to upbringing and its content, newly conceived content taking into account universal human moral principles, etc.

New quality of upbringing lies in its focus on a new person living in a new society undergoing transformation, with its pros and cons. A education which on the one hand respects the individuality of a person, imposes, on the other hand, new demands and requirements on a person to be able to come to terms with new values. New values include the development and deepening of democracy and humanism, free development of personality, respecting human rights, observing universal moral principles, knowing and interiorizing new moral relations among people, etc. Such an approach requires not only proclaiming or setting the objectives to students, but also their active cooperation and interest in the activities at school.

We think that the above-mentioned ideas are extraordinarily challenging to our times as well as to teacher training which must ensure that the student does not only learn to “copy” tasks and objectives of the school’s educational impact, but he/she must know how to understand education and its process aspect. This is a task of pedagogical and psychological sciences Without this, a student – future teacher may acquire many concepts falling into the theory of education, but they will have little practical import for a concrete educational influence.

3. Elementary school 1st grade teacher – new requirements

The training of teachers for the first level of elementary schools will have to undertake very serious tasks. Moreover, schools will be faced with many other problems that arose as a result of the changes in the social situation in the last decades and, even more intensively, resulted from the entering of the Slovak Republic to the European Union.

One of such innovations that must be reflected in teacher training is the question of primary education of immigrant children. Nowadays, immigration is no longer a phenomenon recognizable exclusively within Western Europe or the U.S.A, but it has become a global problem, affecting also our countries. Thus, as a factor influencing the life of the whole society it must be also reflected in the system of education.

The primary education of immigrant children, adding to regular content of primary education at our schools, must pay specific attention to some specific requirements, including the following: teaching the national language of the host country (in our case Slovak) as a second language, basics of a host country's history, civic education, human rights, etc. In addition to this, the teacher must be prepared to introduce immigrant children (not in a forcible way) to a host population's cultural habits and to the so-called "typical life style" ("management of life"), which is usually very different from what these children and their parents used to live in. The presence of immigrant children in the classroom may, unfortunately, bring manifestations of racism or social exclusiveness which will have to be dealt with by the teacher. These are the problems we should not forget about.

Another socially conditioned "innovation" in primary education is a growing diversification of school types in Slovakia. Unlike 15 years ago, when there were just state-owned schools with unified objectives, content and organisation of the educational process, nowadays we are witnessing a constantly rising number of non-state schools, with specifically modified objectives and content (for example, primary educational objectives of church schools are linked to Christian moral principles, while private schools very often focus on specific groups of educants, for example schools for extraordinarily gifted children or children with other specific needs, etc.). We think that this diversification should be sufficiently reflected in teacher training. Therefore, we should not passively rely on teachers later "adapting" themselves to the situation in their teaching practice.

As it is the case with other professions, teachers cannot neglect the need for lifelong education and the necessity to fluently communicate at least in two foreign languages. If the European Commission expects our system of education to observe the so-called M + 2 requirement (to educate every European citizen in such a way that in addition to the mother tongue "M", he/she can speak two more foreign languages), teachers should serve as model examples for their pupils in this respect as well, even if we are aware of the fact that this will not be easy at all.

The question of foreign languages is connected with another extraordinarily topical problem of contemporary Slovak elementary education, that is, a massive pressure of parents to create and extend possibilities to teach foreign languages at elementary schools already from the first grade; the age limit of an initial familiarising with a foreign language is often (especially in larger cities where it is made possible by having enough foreign language teachers) pushed as far as to the pre-school, kindergarten age.

Here we should be aware of the fact that the pressure of parents is really massive, supported by the broadcasting of various foreign language programmes in the media and by the ever growing "courses" for children of pre-school and younger

school age offered by various educational institutions (centres of spare time, language schools, etc.). Responsible headmasters of kindergartens or elementary schools cannot ignore or underestimate such pressure, especially because the “teaching” of foreign languages in Slovakia has become a means of competition. If a school does not offer such possibilities to its students, it is not able to efficiently address parents and thus attract enough pupils to its classrooms.

Why do we consider this situation problematic, if we could perceive it as a positive example of parents’ and headmasters’ willingness to update and improve education from its very beginning?

First, the problematic nature of the situation lies especially in the fact that both in preschool facilities and at the first level of elementary schools foreign languages are taught mainly by non-qualified teachers. One of the last surveys of the qualification structure of Slovak foreign language teachers (Gadušová – Malá – Muglová, 2003) shows that there is just 16.7% of qualified teachers at the first level of elementary schools. The percentage is even significantly lower for kindergartens. Moreover, of the 16.7%, almost 90% of teachers have been trained to teach at the 2nd level of elementary schools and at secondary schools. These teachers are often confronted with serious problems of their own adaptation to the teaching of little pupils, because (as they themselves frequently claim) they have not been taught about the pedagogical and psychological features of this age group; they do not know how to “anticipate” the children’s responses; they do not know how to teach without writing and reading; they do not have sufficient methodological training, taking into account the fact that the teaching of little children requires specific and often time and material consuming preparation. A specific problem is the teaching of pronunciation, especially because little children are not yet able to use transcription of pronunciation and teachers are not used to fixing the pronunciation by a constant reviewing of vocabulary through various methods. Insufficient managing of such “conversion” of the teacher from the secondary to the elementary level of education often results in redundant stress and frustration; and, moreover, in a “hidden” animosity of the teacher to young learners. Such a situation is, of course, not the best precondition for creative and effective teaching of foreign languages.

Secondly, apart from weaknesses in the organization of teaching, the lack of systematic approach and the resulting unrestrainedness that are typical side-effects of the parents’ interest in having their children taught foreign languages from a very early age can bring other important risks. Since there is no systematic continuation in teaching foreign languages to children from the age of 6 or even 3, and since there is little possibility to differentiate children of different levels of FL proficiency at elementary schools, those children are usually integrated into classes with children who have not learned foreign languages before, so they have

to be beginners again. It is not rare that this situation is repeated at the secondary level again.

Moreover, there is a risk of putting too much load on pupils and thus demotivating them toward learning of foreign languages. Let us mention some research carried out in France during the last decades focused on the optimal starting age for foreign language learning. It proved that children starting in foreign languages before the age of 10 were strongly motivated to learn any foreign language because of poems, nursery rhymes, folk and popular songs, even short dramas which are usually used as methods of TEFL for young learners. However, after 2-3 years of learning when children have reached a basic vocabulary and communicative skills sufficient for simple communication in everyday situations, when they have reached the time for the acquisition of grammar structures of a language's inner system, they suddenly begin to lose their interest.

Summarizing the above mentioned risks, it is obvious that **it is high time to pay appropriate attention to the training of elementary school teachers who will be specialized in foreign language teaching to young learners.**

Naturally, there will be opinions questioning the necessity of such specialization within teacher training for elementary schools. They might point out that it would be sufficient to extend the methodological training of foreign language teachers for the second level of elementary schools and secondary schools. In response to this, we would claim, however, that the teaching at the first level of elementary schools is such a specific area of education, and its content, methodology and means differ so significantly from those which are applied at other educational levels, that it is not responsible to train them through some kinds of fast courses or through re-qualifying training – usually limited in duration. We consider full-fledged training of specialists, that is, in our case, teachers for the primary level of education specialising in the teaching of a foreign language, to be a key and exceptionally urgent question in the context of contemporary innovations in the training of teachers for the primary level of elementary school.

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