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## CONFERENCE REPORTS

### Educational change in the global context

The international conference *Educational change in the global context* was held in Prague, August 30th – September 3rd, 2010. The conference was organised by the Faculty of Education of Charles University in Prague, its Institute for Research and Development of Education (IRDE), and the Comparative Education Section of the Czech Pedagogical Society, under the auspices of Václav Hampl, the Rector of Charles University. The conference was part of a long term project by the Research Centre on Education, supported by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport.

The end of summer is a busy season for educational conferences. Despite the competition of several annual meetings, the conference brought together more than 120 participants, half of which were from the Czech Republic, and half from twenty foreign countries representing all continents except Africa. This very representative group of comparativists from all over the world was attracted by the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the region with a record of twenty years of rather turbulent educational change.

The participants were welcomed by Radka Wildová, Dean of the Faculty of Education, and Stanislav Štech, Vice-Rector of Charles University. In her opening speech, Eliška Walterová, Chair of the Conference and Director of IRDE, introduced the conference theme, and presented a short outline of the recent history of education in the hosting country.

The first plenary session continued with an invited lecture on educational transformation in East Central European countries by Wolfgang Mitter (Deutsches Institut für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung, Frankfurt a. M.). This prominent educationalist and a long-term friend of the hosting country was awarded the Silver Medal of Charles University for outstanding contributions to Czech comparative education at the conference welcome reception, hosted by the Faculty of Education.

Generally, the conference had a strong selection of keynote speakers – besides W. Mitter, they included Mark Bray (University of Hong Kong); Joseph Tobin (Arizona State University), and Anthony Welch (University of Sydney). The full texts of their papers are part of this issue of *Orbis Scholae*, so we will not comment on them in detail. From Tuesday to Thursday, the outstanding programme consisted of further keynote lectures, parallel sessions of submitted papers, symposia, and poster sessions. Each late afternoon, a guided tour or field trip was offered.

The first parallel session on **the responses of educational systems to global challenges** above all discussed the key question about the role of comparative education in a globalized world. Sophisticated but uniform methodology of studies of educational achievement, backed by global actors of educational policy, were critically analyzed as not respecting the complexity of the different cultural contexts and richness of the world of education. Strong arguments for

the necessity to reconsider more complex understanding of comparison and comparative education fields were presented. Comparative education based only on measuring indicators serves as an instrument of educational policy, or of certain power groups or persons. The rich understanding of educational systems needs qualitative research and deep understanding of human identities as well. Such comparative education as the academic field could interpret critically new phenomena in education (e. g. marketization, privatization, competition) and their consequences for change of educational models. The qualitative renewal of comparative education fostered the development of its capacity to respond to major global challenges through interpretation of the global phenomena in different cultural and social contexts. Reflection of changing socio-cultural context helps predict changes in educational culture and expectations. This consideration was confirmed by several papers concerning, e.g. new paradigms of visual culture, or dealing with social and cultural change at universities shifting from elite to mass or universal education.

The session on **educational transformation after the collapse of totalitarian regimes** included individual country studies as well as more comparative pieces of work in post-communist countries. Papers presented in this session referred to developments in the following countries (in alphabetical order): Bosnia-Herzegovina, China, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Russia. Not only comparison among post-communist countries was presented, but these countries were often confronted with “western countries” as a reference point (e.g. changing values in East and West). The thematic areas that have been tackled emphasized, among other things, the early tracking and other issues of equity and access (educational inequalities, education experiences of refugee children, home schooling), structural changes in educational systems with special emphasis on vocational education and training, transformation of values in post-conflict societies, and growth and forms of privatization of education. The session has pointed out that the analyses of educational change in post-totalitarian regimes not only help to understand the social processes and inform the educational policy in the region hosting the conference, but also contribute to the development of theories of educational change.

The session on **school change for real improvement** covered problems of school management and leadership, school culture, new literacies, social aspects in education, as well as teacher professional development. Increasing school autonomy and decentralization seems to be a common and significant shift in all represented countries during the past approx. 20 years. School autonomy promotes desired choice in education, as well as a quasi-market environment. For the success of reforms, it is important to listen to the voices of all stakeholders in education (not only ministries, boards, and directors, but also teachers, pupils, parents, etc.). Teacher education faces the problem that yesterday’s teacher educators (with yesterday’s technologies) educate teachers for tomorrow.

Last but not least, the session on **changing approaches to curriculum and curricular policy** included reports on curricular reforms in several Central and

West European countries. The presentations addressed, among other things, several general issues of curricular reforms: de-centralisation of curricular design and school-based curriculum development, the troubled subject knowledge/key competencies relationships, differences between the intention and reality of curricular change. Overall, the presentations stressed rather weak theoretical foundations of the reforms, the large difference between the intended and delivered curriculum.

The following **symposia** took place:

1. International Education – New system of knowledge or holding corporation of separate (but equal?) fiefdoms? chaired by Josef Mestenhauser (University of Minnesota, USA);
2. The implementation of education for sustainable development as a key concept to meet global change – chair Verena Holz (Leuphana University of Lueneburg, Germany);
3. Globalization, diversity, citizenship, and education: Studies of social science curricula, chaired by Francisco Ramirez (Stanford University, USA);
4. Resocialization Education/Pedagogy – a new topic in the theory and practice? – chair Karel Rýdl (University of Pardubice, Czech Republic).

As one of us has a long-term interest in social studies textbooks, we really enjoyed the third symposium by Ramirez and his team from Stanford University (USA). Among others, the presentations addressed the fundamental tension between the traditional goal of education – promoting a cohesive national identity, and the need to teach respect and equality among diverse social groups in contemporary society. Patricia Bromley showed how the balance between diversity and national unity is reached in Canadian social studies textbooks by different strategies, e. g. by framing human rights and interculturalism as a part of national identity, or by celebrating Canadian contributions to world culture as a source of national pride.

The **poster session** was used mostly by the Czech and Slovak researchers as an opportunity to present additional insights into the problems of their school systems and receive feedback, both from the leading experts in the field.

On the last day of the conference, the concluding panel discussion, **20 years of educational transformations in post-communist countries**, chaired by David Greger, put together experts from post-totalitarian countries with researchers who monitor the changes in Central and Eastern Europe from the outside. While the participants from transforming countries (Nina Borevskaya from Russia, Stanislav Štech from the hosting country) talked about their disappointments, negatives, and dead ends of changes in their countries, observers from the outside (Wolfgang Mitter from Germany, and Alex Wiseman from USA) emphasized the scope of changes, and reminded us that the open climate and free discussion of problems of change during this conference are proof that transformation from a totalitarian society was mainly successful.

Those who like to get out of the lecture halls into the field had an opportunity to visit a basic school (primary and lower secondary comprehensive school), or an upper secondary school (technological college). The visitors saw the facilities and

met the heads of the two different and successful schools. The participants enjoyed the guided tours through lesser-known parts of Prague, while the pre-conference trip to the Terezín Ghetto served as a remembrance of the clandestine education of imprisoned Jewish children during the Holocaust.

The presentations and discussions showed that the changing educational environment is *not* typical only for post-totalitarian countries. This phenomenon is reflected throughout Europe, and the whole world. An international comparative perspective can be a starting point for fruitful discussions, and a unique opportunity for learning from each other as different educational contexts, historical circumstances, and different cultural backgrounds may sometimes lead to similar problems and challenges in education. However, there seems to be a more or less wide gap between educational researchers and policy makers. Comparative educational research should be able to bring persuading empirical evidence and arguments, and then communicate them to decision making bodies through an understandable language.

The relatively broad thematic scope of the conference offered an insight into aspects of education that may be outside of the specialised professional range of a particular researcher, and contributed to greater appreciation of the role of contemporary comparative education.

This enriching, but also enjoyable, scientific experience would not be possible without the commitment of keynote speakers and all of the presenters, the session and symposia chairs and discussants, and all the participants. The Organizing Committee and the students and staff of the Faculty of Education deserve thanks for their hard work and dedication, and for making the conference a success.

Most of the presentations can be downloaded from the conference web site: [edconf2010.pedf.cuni.cz](http://edconf2010.pedf.cuni.cz).

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