

EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION IN SLOVAKIA: THE ONGOING SEARCH FOR A SOLUTION

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Abstract: *The study presents the Slovak Educational System in its historical perspective, especially in a period of time after political changes in 1989 characterised as a started but not finished yet process of transformation. The authors describe the current shape of this system in some specific areas - management and administration of the educational system, financing of the school system, structure of the Slovak educational system, curricular policy and development, monitoring and quality control, school autonomy and its instruments, the role of the teachers, support structures and social dimension. They characterise the key problems and perspectives of the process of transformation, where some necessary steps were already done, but the outcomes for a complex educational reform are still not prepared as a main priority of the governmental policy, although the Slovak education system shows the attributes of stagnation, what would have a bad impact to a future of economic growth and a development of social life in the country.*

Key words: *educational system, educational reform, educational transformation, macro and micro level of educational development, systemic reform of education, strategic documents and acts*

1. Basic Information on the Country

Slovakia – the official name is the Slovak Republic – is the smallest country in the group of V4 in terms of area and population. Its area is 49,035 km² with 5,422,000 (2004) inhabitants. The capital city Bratislava is situated in the south-west of the country, on the left bank of the river Danube, very close to Austria. Slovakia is a parliamentary republic, where legislative power is in hands of the national parliament with its 150 members. Executive power is in the hands of the government, while the head of the country is a directly-elected president.

The Slovak Republic was established on 1st January 1993 after the partition of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic (Czechoslovakia). Slovakia had been a part of Czechoslovakia since 1918. Previously, in fact since the 11th century, it was a part of Hungary or the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Slovaks were an ethnic minority on the margins of political, economical and cultural power. From this position Slovaks gradually formed themselves to a modern nation, whose political, social and economical ambitions were realised only when Czechoslovakia was formed. The establishment of a standardised Slovak language by a group of Slovak intellectuals in 1843 created a possibility of cultural development, but was restricted by the national policy of the Hungarian state in the second half of the 19th century. The

Slovak language was only used in a limited way within the Hungarian educational system at the primary level of education. There was no possibility of education in Slovak at secondary or higher levels of education. The Slovak primary, secondary and higher educational system started to work only after Czechoslovakia had been established. The first Slovak university – Comenius University in Bratislava - was established in 1919.

During the Second World War there was a puppet Slovak republic as a result of Hitler's central European politics. It was completely dominated by Germany. After the restoration of Czechoslovakia in 1945, and the political takeover in 1948 by the communists, Slovakia became for more than 40 years part of the Soviet Union's sphere of interest. An attempt at democratic changes in the late 1960s was forcibly interrupted in 1968 by Russia and its allies. Satisfying the ambitions of the pro-soviet Slovak politicians, in 1969 Czechoslovakia was declared a state made up of two federal republics. The principles of federation were not fulfilled because of the centralised political power of the Communist Party. This was seen also in the educational system, which was formally autonomous in both federal republics, but actually was influenced by the ideology of the Communist Party.

The end of communism in Czechoslovakia in 1989 meant the start of fundamental political, economic, social and cultural changes leading towards a democratic political system and market economy. The political and ideological privileges of the Communist Party codified in the constitution were repealed. This had a far-reaching implication for education, too. Among a group of political leaders in Slovakia an idea about a future Slovakia as an independent country became popular. Their strengthened political pressure led to the peaceful and properly managed partition of Czechoslovakia within a legal framework.

The establishment of the Slovak republic in 1993 was a new precedent in the history of the Slovaks. They set up their national state without any dependence on foreign political influence. This affected the process of construction of the political, economic, social and cultural system of the country. While, for example, in the Czech republic, Hungary or Poland from the beginning of the political changes in the 1990s a pluralist system of political parties was based on right – left polarity, in Slovakia that polarity was determined more by the questions of the place of authority or democracy in public life, of nationalism, isolation, orientation towards the East or towards the European Union etc. The right – left polarity of the Slovak political parties has become more evident only in the last few years.

The Slovak republic at the time its establishment appeared to be the least developed country in the region. The other unique characteristic of Slovakia, as the youngest country in the region, is its ethnic structure. Slovakia is a multi-ethnic country. There are 85.8% Slovaks, 9.7% Hungarians, 1.7% Roma (actually around 9%), 0.8% Czechs, 2% Ruthenian, Ukrainians, Germans, Polish and others. This structure is not a result of migration in the 20th century. It has historical roots (except for the Czechs in Slovakia which is the result of a natural migration of inhabitants in the former Czechoslovakia).

After the years of turbulence, economic instability and relative international

isolation, most problems in a field of international relations, economic development and social stabilisation were successfully overcome, so that nowadays Slovakia is, at least, comparable with the other post-communist countries of the region. In 2000 it became a member of OECD. Since 2004 (March) it has been a member of NATO and in May 2004 it became, together with its neighbours, the Czech republic, Poland and Hungary, a member of the EU.

At present (2007) Slovakia shows the second fastest level of economic growth among the EU countries. Thanks to successful reforming steps in the field of tax and enterprise policy, the volume of foreign investment has risen considerably. This has had a positive effect on the rate of unemployment. Economic growth affects all areas of social life. The need for a qualified, movable and flexible labour force put pressure on the educational system, which has been not reformed, unlike other social and economic sectors. It shows the attributes of a stagnating system, which will have a bad effect on the future of economic growth and the development of social life in this country.

2. Transformation of the Educational System (1989 – 2006)

The results of political changes in 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia were similar to those in the other post-communist countries of the region. Above all, the formal „deconstruction“ of the political and economic system determined by „the leading role of the Communist Party in society“ had to be undertaken. The process of „deconstruction“ was naturally transferred to the educational system. Although its formal structure was not disrupted, already in 1990 some fundamental content changes were made in the curricula of those school subjects which had been based on the ideology of the Communist Party. In primary and secondary schools this concerned History and Civic Education. In universities the changes applied to the so-called Marxist – Leninist departments. They existed at all universities under the direct control of the Communist Party. All students had to attend such subjects as Political Economy, Marxist-Leninist Philosophy and also (for the students of pedagogic faculties) Scientific Atheism.

From 1990 a spontaneous process of democratisation appeared in the system of school management in the form of progress towards self-government. Teachers, employees and students started to vote for their heads, deans and rectors. They spontaneously created the self-governing authorities of schools and faculties. This created the conditions for systematic legislative changes in the form of an attempt to elaborate a document outlining the future development of the system of Slovak education. It was published by the Ministry of Education in 1990 under the heading „Spirit of School“. Some ideas from that document were turned into partial legislative changes, but it did not attract the interest of political leaders making strategic decisions.

The political and economical changes after 1989 also had some negative effects, which appeared in a field of education. The new educational policy was implemented under rather unfavourable socio-economic conditions. These

conditions were influenced primarily by a decline in the performance of the economy and a high unemployment rate, including among graduates, which led to a decline in demand for skilled workers and to a lowering in the social provision of the education system (reduction in kindergartens, school clubs, extra-curricular educational establishments).

This situation resulted in undesirable changes in terms of values and in a stronger social differentiation between different sectors of the population with all the negative political and social consequences that result from this in terms of the instability of political structures and government. There was not enough interest among the leading political elites of the country to focus their attention on fundamental questions of education and how the system of education might develop through high quality educational legislation acting as a decisive instrument of successful management (The Educational System in Slovakia, 1995).

The first few years after the establishment of an independent Slovak republic were marked by two different forms of educational development. On the macro level, determined mainly by decisions of government, this was a time of stagnation. There were no legislative, organizational or curricular decisions which could fundamentally influence the quality of the educational system.

The micro level of educational development, on the other hand, proceeded in a non-governmental area and was aimed mainly at the positive shaping of teachers' educational strategies in primary and secondary schools. Enthusiastic teachers and other educators started to associate around non-governmental organisations developing international educational projects trying to reform the educational system and curricula. At that time they created some projects which have probably been of most influence in changing the educational practice of the teachers at primary and secondary schools, something which is noticeable also at the present day (for example Project Orava – implementation of the principles of democracy in schools, the project of Integrated Thematic Instruction, the Program Step by Step...).

The spontaneous reforming movement at micro level was so strong and had such great influence on public opinion that it was not possible to allow it to affect the outline of education policy at the macro level. In 1994 the Ministry of Education initiated a public discussion and after that a strategic document – "Konštatntín [Constantine]". That document tried to design a vision of educational development for the next 10 years with the aim of reaching some qualitative and quantitative changes that would take Slovak education close to European standards. For example:

- raising the number of secondary school graduates among the population of 18-year-olds from 40% to 80%,
- raising the number of accepted students at higher educational institutions among the population of 18-year-olds from 11% to 30%,
- raising the number of students among the population between 25 and 65 from 7% to 10.7% (Zelina 2005).

That project was very ambitious, but in many areas it did not begin from the real

potential of the economy and the dynamics of political and social development in Slovakia at that time. In spite of that, it could have offered a good programme for the forthcoming period of reconstruction and modernization of the Slovak educational system. This did not happen. Mainly for political reasons it was not accepted by the new government after an election in the same year.

The most successful project has been one called "Millennium". Thanks to the initiative undertaken by a group of educational experts it has looked for a possible social and political consensus on the elaboration of a national education programme. In 2001 this was approved by the government as "The National Programme of Education" and after that, in 2002, the national parliament approved it too.

The programme is elaborated over 12 areas, which are the basis for educational development over the next 10 – 15 years. These 12 areas could be seen as "the conceptual pillars" (Zelina 2005) of the national programme:

1. revitalisation of educational research and participation in international research and developmental projects,
2. humanisation of educational practice (basing it on principles of pupil/student-centred education),
3. curricular transformation – elaborating a curriculum at two levels (national and individual school curriculum) and reducing the nationally-determined educational content to 60% (40% of the educational content would be implemented by school curricula according to the local context and individual needs of pupils and students),
4. innovation of educational strategies leading towards experiential forms of learning,
5. decentralisation of school management and administration,
6. emphasis on teachers' professional development, elaborating a system of motivation for their lifelong learning and a system of career development for them,
7. funding schools – till 2006 rising by 3.2% of GDP,
8. creating a system of supporting institutions for schools,
9. intensive implementation of ICT in schools,
10. increasing the quality of foreigner language instruction and aim for students ending secondary education speaking at least two foreign languages,
11. making secondary schools more flexible towards practical needs and increasing the motivation for lifelong learning,
12. creating a systemic and legislative framework for transformation of the educational system.

Carrying out the programme was problematic from the beginning. There were many reasons for this. One of them was the fact, that the political consensus about the document among political parties in the national parliament was not real. The implementation of the "conceptual pillars" depended on the political will of a government, or on the personal opinion of a particular minister of education.

The next serious problem was based on the fact that the programme and its proposals were approved without real knowledge of the actual state of the Slovak

school system and education under changed political, economic and international conditions. Slovakia was the only one among the group of Visegrád countries which did not use the opportunity to gain financial help from EU funds during the accession process for analysing and evaluating its educational system and this was not even done using national resources. Political elites and education experts upheld for a long time a view about the high quality of the Slovak educational system and educational practice. They influenced public opinion and inhibited public pressure for the necessary changes.

Because of a lack of real political consensus, the conditions for realising the “conceptual pillars” were not present. There were still not enough stimuli and institutions for carrying out the research needed for planning the strategic steps of educational reform. This seemed (and still seems) to be a fundamental condition for high-quality systemic educational reform in Slovakia. The need of such reform has been partly satisfied by particular education law amendments, though most of those amendments were done “ad hoc” without any systematic perspective. The administration concentrated its effort at first on institutional changes while the only changes that took place were the spontaneous (not systematic) educational innovations on the micro-level of the educational system.

The Act on the System of Primary and Secondary Schools from 1984, based on the educational policy of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic represented by the project “The Further Development of the Czechoslovak System of Education” (1976), is still valid in Slovakia. This act is a very good example of steps taken in deconstructing the ideological basis of education under communism and also an example of how the process of modernisation of the school system was primarily done in accordance with actual political and administrative needs. Miron Zelina (2005), one of the key authors of the project “Millennium”, points out that during 1990 – 2005 the Act on the System of Primary and Secondary Schools was amended 12 times. If we choose some of those amendments in chronological order, we can see what the education policy generated and what were the main areas in which the administration focused its attention during the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the educational system between 1990 – 2005.

The first amendments were made early in 1990 to avoid the ideological monopoly of the Communist Party in education. They also founded the pluralistic character of the educational system, with the possibility of establishing private and church schools as an alternative to state schools. The length of compulsory school attendance was set on 9 years.

After the formation of the Slovak republic there was an amendment in 1994. The right of national minorities in Slovakia to be educated in their own languages was defined by law (it had been realised in practice a long time before). The amendment in 1998 extended compulsory school attendance from 9 to 10 years. In 2000 there was an amendment to solve the problem of education of pupils and students with special educational needs educated at a “separate special school [*osobitná škola*]”. This was renamed a “special basic school [*špeciálna základná škola*]” and the pupils and students at those schools, previously called “disabled”, were renamed “pupils/

students with special educational needs". All the educational functions, educational approaches and methods at such schools remained the same.

So far the only amendment, which has had a more important systemic effect was the one passed in 2001. It was a reaction to a new act reorganising the state administration and self-government. The municipalities and the higher self-governing authorities became the new founders of schools and school facilities which had previously been state foundations. It also affected of the system of financing those schools and school facilities. The next amendment to the act in the same year set up a multi-source school financing system. The financial resources coming from the state budget to the schools started to be distributed in a "normative" way (depending on the number of students and other clear indicators). This helped to make financial flows from the taxes of citizens to the school system clear, systemic and under public control. The centralised administrative role of the state in the school system became more devolved towards local authorities.

The amendments of 2002 redefined the basic school (ISCED 1 – 2) as an institution with 9 grades and the possibility of establishing a "zero grade/ zero class". Zero grade/zero class was set up for six year old children who did not achieve the necessary level of ability and came from socially disadvantaged settings. They did not have to deal successfully with the curriculum of the first grade in one school year (they could do it in two school years – the zero and the first one). Thanks to that, it has been possible to employ teacher assistants at kindergartens and basic schools. They can help to these children to overcome mainly language, health and social barriers, which make the process of their adaptation to school settings more difficult.

The Act on the System of Primary and Secondary Schools and its amendments was an example of state administrators understanding the meaning of the notion "educational reform" in past years. The situation is similar in the case of other acts which fundamentally influence the Slovak educational system:

- the Act on State Administration and Self-Government in Education (1990, amended in 1996, 1999, 2001, 2003),
- the Higher Education Act (1990, amended in 1996, new act in 2002),
- the Act on School Facilities (1993, amended in 2001),
- the Act on Further Education (1997, amendment of 2001),
- The Act on Funding the School System (2001, 2003).

3. Management and Administration of the Educational System

The management and administration of the educational system are governed by those education acts. The central body of the state administration for all schools and school facilities is the Ministry of Education. This represents a central authority creating a unified state education policy. The ministry and some of its directly managed central organisations such as the State Pedagogical Institute and State Vocational Education Institute prepare draft laws and general binding legal regulations in the field of education. Its main task is to draw up the general

study plans and curricula for all type of schools and school facilities at pre-primary, primary and secondary level of education (ISCED 0 - 4). It is also responsible for examining the issues concerning education and its further development.

General administration at regional level is represented by eight regional school offices which have been working since 2002. In that year the state administration was transferred to municipalities and self-administrative regions. The competences of the school offices are identical with the seats and territorial area of competence of the self-governing regions.

The work of the state administration in the field of kindergartens, primary schools and school facilities has been transferred to municipalities, including that of establishing and closing schools and facilities, appointing school principals, creating the right economic, material, technical and personnel conditions for the operation of schools and school facilities, and managing the appropriate spending of allocated funds. Self-administrative regions have been authorised to establish and close secondary schools, special schools and school facilities and to be in charge of the state administration at the second level (Educational System in Slovakia 2005).

According to the Act on State Administration and Self-Government in Education (2003) the structure of the state administration of the school system is hierarchically organised from the top, as represented by the Ministry of Education and other central state administration bodies, the State School Inspectorate which is accountable to Regional Educational Authorities, municipalities (within the scope of the authorities which have been transferred from closed district offices) and principals of schools and school facilities.

4. Financing the School System

In spite of some particular steps in the process of educational reform and different statements of intent by new Slovak governments, education does not belong among their real priorities. What makes this evident is the level of expenditure on education from the state budget.

Expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP for all levels of education shows one of the main reasons leading to a low quality of education in Slovakia according to international comparisons (for example PISA 2003).

Since 2004 the funding of schools has been regulated by the Act on Funding Basic Schools, Secondary Schools and School Facilities. According to the Act the state budget covers free education at primary and secondary schools, the financing of educational and provision of fees for financing development, reconstruction, modernisation and material-technical equipment at schools. The financing of state schools from the state budget is based on a formula designating contributions for each calendar year according to number of pupils or students from the school. The norm includes a wage norm (for wages and salaries, insurance and employer's contributions) and an operational norm (funds annually prescribed for running costs of the school and costs for the teaching process estimated per pupil or student).

Table 1. Expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP for all levels of education (1995, 2000, 2003) from public and private sources, by source of funding and year.

2003			2000			1995		
Public	Private	Total	Public	Private	Total	Public	Private	Total
4,3	0,5	4,7	3,9	0,1	4,1	4,6	0,1	4,7

Table 2. Annual expenditure on educational institutions per student for all services (2003) in equivalent US dollars, by level of education, based on full-time equivalents.

Pre-primary education (for children 3 years and older)		Secondary education			Tertiary education (including R&D activities)	All tertiary education excluding R&D activities	Primary to tertiary education
	Primary education	Lower secondary education	Upper secondary education	All secondary education	Tertiary-type A & advanced research programmes		
2 641	2 020	2 106	2 737	2 401	4 678	4 299	2 602

Non-state schools receive grants according to a similar formula to that for state schools, but the funds for reconstruction and modernisation of school equipment are not provided from the state budget.

For financing regular non-compulsory special-interest education, the pupils and students are granted educational vouchers (Educational System... 2005).

Table 3. Total public expenditure on education (1995, 2003). Direct public expenditure on educational institutions plus public subsidies to households (which include subsidies for living costs) and other private entities, as a percentage of GDP and as a percentage of total public expenditure, by level of education and year.

Public expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure				Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP			
2003			1995	2003			1995
Primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education	Tertiary education	All levels of education combined	All levels of education combined	Primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education	Tertiary education	All levels of education combined	All levels of education combined
7.3	2.2	11.2	8.8	2.9	0.9	4.4	5.0

Source: Education at a Glance, 2006

5. Structure of the Educational System

The Slovak educational system reflects the historical development of Slovakia as a geographical, social and cultural area. Its current form is mostly determined by the Austro-Hungarian tradition of centralised and selective schooling, the Czechoslovak tradition of a unified school system and the educational ideals of J. A. Comenius (especially his idea of instruction based on illustrated textbooks understood as a model description of the world which a pupil or student has to learn – mostly by heart) and by uniform curriculum and education strategies transmitting knowledge on a centralised basis – an approach that is a heritage of communism. Although the Slovak school system has been changed in many ways since 1989, these three historical determinants are still present at all levels of the system.

The organisation of the institutional education is based on a system of “education and training”¹ which is defined by law. This system is horizontally and vertically segmented and consists of two types of institutions – schools and school facilities. The school facilities form a supporting system for education at schools. The founders of schools and school facilities at all levels of the system are the state, self-governing authorities, churches and individuals.

¹ The terminology is influenced by German and Russian educational terminology. Education is understood as the formation of a pupil's or student's personality. Training is a process of providing knowledge and the ability to use it in practice. Recently the notion of education has been defined as an integration of education and training. We use it in this way.

1. *Kindergarten* (ISCED 0) is a pre-school education facility for 3 (possible 2) – 6 year-old children. Its aim is to complement family education a child's whole personal development and to prepare the child for compulsory education. Education at kindergarten is optional. Special kindergartens or classes for children with special needs have also been established.

2. *Basic school* (ISCED 1, 2) represents the first period of compulsory school attendance lasting 9 years (from 6 to 15 years old). It is divided into two stages. The first stage – primary school (ISCED 1) lasts 4 years (grades 1 – 4). The second stage – lower secondary school (ISCED 2) lasts 5 years (grades 5 – 9). The basic school provides general education. Its curriculum is compulsory for all pupils or students at basic schools and it is centrally defined as a general framework curriculum which could be carried out according to three alternative study plans.

Children are admitted to a basic school upon attaining the age of 6 years. Children with special needs attend a special basic school with the same structure as a basic school, but with a different curriculum and educational strategy. Special basic schools usually accept children on the recommendation of educational and psychological advisory centres established in each region.

Most primary schools also include some school facilities - school club, school library or other facilities for education outside classes. After finishing basic school, students are required to apply for a secondary school and at least to complete their compulsory school attendance (1 year).

In the early 1990s a new step was taken by establishing the so called Eight-Year Gymnasium (general secondary school) which joined the second stage of basic school with secondary school (ISCED 2 + ISCED 3A). Pupils finishing the first stage of basic school with very good educational results can apply to this school through the entrance exam (generally Mathematics and the Slovak language or the instructional language of the relevant school – Hungarian, Ukrainian...).

3. *Secondary school* (ISCED 3, 4) provides upper secondary education and guarantees the last year of compulsory school attendance. Getting a secondary school education is possible in one of three streams of upper secondary schools. The first one is represented by the Gymnasium, the second one leads through the Technical Secondary School and the third one is the Vocational Secondary School.

Gymnasium (ISCED 3A) is a general grammar school and prepares students for study at higher educational institutions or for a post-secondary study. A Gymnasium is normally 4 years, though a bilingual one is 5 years and there is also a possibility of attending gymnasias for 8 years.

Technical Secondary School (ISCED 3A) provides technical education with a school-leaving certificate [*maturita*] and higher vocational education. It prepares students for occupations and professional activities in all spheres of the economy, administration, culture, art and social life, and, at the same time, prepares them for further education.

Vocational Secondary School (ISCED 3C, 3A) prepares students for skilled performance in manual trades and professional activities in production and services in all branches of the national economy. The study takes 3 years (ISCED

3C) or 4 years (ISCED 3A). It is possible to supplement the three-year study with another two years and get a school-leaving certificate (ISCED 3A).

Apprentice School (ISCED 2C) is established for children of 15, who do not finish successfully all the grades of basic school. It represents a special type of school preparing the students for trades based mainly on vocational training.

4. *Basic School of Art* is a special-interest education institution which provides education to the young generation away from compulsory school attendance. It offers children and adults the chance to enhance their interest and natural talents in the field of music, fine art, drama and dancing. There are three levels of study: preparatory (for junior pupils of primary school), basic (for pupils of lower secondary school and students of secondary school) and extended (for extraordinarily talented persons).

5. *Higher Education Institutions* (ISCED 5, 6) are based on a three-level system of education (according to the Higher Education Act approved in 2002): Bachelor (3 years), Magister (Master) or Technical Engineer (2 or 3 years) and Doctorate - PhD. (3 years). The Higher Education Institution could be public or private. There is a possibility of establishing separate independent Higher Education Institutions, but most of them are organised in a system of universities.

6. *Schools for National Minorities* are incorporated in a standard school system in terms of both horizontal and vertical structure. Depending on the concrete needs and interests of the members of a particular national minority, they function from pre-school education to higher education. The schools for national minorities are organised as follows:

- schools (classes) using the language of the minority as a language of instruction, while the Slovak language is used as a foreign language,
- schools (classes) using the language of the minority in combination with the Slovak language – bilingual education,
- schools (classes) using the language of the minority in a particular school subject, while the other subjects are taught in Slovak.

In addition to these there are also some various alternative ways of using the language of the national minority.

The Slovak educational system is complex and its educational institutions cover the educational needs of the whole population in each age category and at each level. The network of educational institutions is relatively dense, especially at pre-school level and at the level providing compulsory school attendance. According to data of the Institute of Information and Prognoses in Education (2007) the average capacity of kindergartens is 47 children per institution, and of basic schools 224 pupils per school (school year 2006/2007). Recently the number of children attending kindergartens and the number of kindergartens has gone down. In the 2001/2002 school year there were 150,587 children in 3,243 pre-school institutions. This reduction is caused partly by population decline, but also has socio-economic causes. The OECD Review – An Economic Survey of the Slovak Republic, 2007 (Policy Brief, 2007) says:

Table 4. System of education and training (school year 2006/2007)

Higher education	Special schools	Secondary schools	Gymnasias	Basic schools of art	Basic schools	Kinder-gartens	Schools and school facilities	
23	356	472	162	187	2146	2849	Facilities	State
109	3324	7138	2745	x	23025	6565	Faculties/classrooms, groups	
124123	30733	187088	80969	92327	483953	136514	Students/pupils	
8	8	73	30	62	26	40	Facilities	Private
13	16	665	185	x	149	87	Faculties/ classrooms, groups	
2278	143	14283	3690	21274	2305	1545	Students/ pupils	
0	12	13	54	11	111	39	Facilities	Church
0	59	132	535	x	1186	84	Faculties/ classrooms, groups	
0	514	3365	15272	3485	24252	1955	Students/pupils	
31	376	558	246	260	2283	2928	Facilities	Total
122	3399	7935	3465	x	24360	6736	Faculties/ classrooms, groups	
126401	31390	204736	99931	117086	510510	140014	Students/pupils	

Source: Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education

Table 5. Schools and Students according to Language of Instruction

Total	year 2006							Total	Number of pupils and students									
	Special schools	Second. Schools	Gymnasia	Basic schools	Kinder-gartens	Number of schools						total	Learning language					
						total							Slovak	Hungarian	Ukrainian	Other		
						Language of schol												
						Slovak	Slovak - hungarian	Slovak - ukrain.	Hungarian	Ukrainian	Other		Slovak	Hungarian	Ukrainian	Other		
6489	442	590	246	2283	2928	total							total					
5701	409	532	218	1985	2557	Slovak							140014	130807	8922	243	42	
177	18	40	7	33	79	Slovak - hungarian							510510	475389	34119	457	545	
5	0	1	0	1	3	Slovak - ukrain.							99931	93954	5620	124	233	
581	15	17	19	252	278	Hungarian							213438	203772	9625	41	0	
18	0	0	1	7	10	Ukrainian							33750	32204	1546	0	0	
7	0	0	1	5	1	Other							997643	900000	59832	865	820	

Source: Educational System..., 2005

„International evidence shows that early childhood education has a significant effect on learning in subsequent stages of education, especially for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Accordingly, the authorities plan to increase participation in kindergarten by making it free of charge for five-year olds from 2008 onwards. A practical difficulty with increasing participation is that kindergartens are not available

throughout the country, especially in poor districts with large Roma populations. The government should ensure that municipalities not offering an adequate supply of kindergartens are financially able to do so and in fact do so. Moreover, efforts should be made to increase participation of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds from four years of age. This would be particularly helpful for Roma children as many do not attend kindergarten but stand to gain much from doing so, notably through greater competence in the language of instruction at school".

An institutional guarantee of education creates the conditions for raising the level of formal education of the population. It has recently been going up in the case of tertiary education. According to the census in 1980 and 2001, during the last twenty years the number of inhabitants with secondary education has risen about 8%, which means in absolute numbers more than 700,000 people. The number of people completing higher education in that time has risen about 2.5%, which means more than 238,000 people (Kosová, 2005). However, in international terms this is not enough, since the figure of 11% of the adult population (25 – 65 years) having been through higher education (Education at a Glance, 2004) ranks the country low down among OECD countries. On the other hand, Slovakia belongs to those OECD countries which have the lowest number of adults (in a category of people from 25 to 65 years) with only lower secondary education – 14%. Slovakia also has the lowest number of dropouts.

Table 6. Formal education of Slovak inhabitants

Formal education	1980 (%)	2001	2001 (%)
Children up to 16		1 079 853	20.1
Basic and non-finished	51.7	1 132 995	21.1
Vocational and apprentice	23.6	1 264 144	23.6
Secondary (school leaving certificate)	17.7	1 378 077*	25.4
Higher education	5.2	423 324	7.9
Without any education or without any formal certificate	1.8	101 082	1.9
Total	100	5 379 455	100

Source: Pedagogical encyclopaedia ...1985, The census... 2002

One of the general characteristics of the Slovak educational system is its vertical and horizontal selectivity. At the vertical level there is a very early selection of pupils according to their school success – the first at 10 years old, when some of them leave basic schools and start at Eight-Year Gymnasia. The next general selection is before the end of compulsory school attendance – when they transfer from basic to different kinds of secondary schools, where the students finish (in one year) their compulsory school attendance. This selection is amplified by a system of pupils repeating classes if they do not achieve the necessary minimum grades in at least two subjects.

At the horizontal level there is selection based on a system of special schools,

especially special schools established for children with learning difficulties. There are a lot of occasions when children with a socially disadvantaged background (without learning difficulties) are put into these schools (mainly Roma children). In general, there is a possibility of educating these children in ordinary schools, but unfortunately at basic schools there is no real practical possibility for internal differentiation and individualised teaching.

The next problem concerns that small number of dropouts who exist in the educational system. There is a very small window of opportunity for returning them back to the educational process to get the minimal qualification necessary for becoming useful in the labour market. At present these people have little chance of doing so. The system is typically one-track (Kasáčová, Hanesová, 1999).

6. Curriculum, Curricular Policy and Development

The centralised educational system is reflected also in curricular content. In spite of many content changes since 1989, central curricular policy has reminded the same. All the schools, included kindergartens (ISCED 0 – 4), manage a process of education determined by centralised curricular documents devised by the Ministry of Education. They are obligatory for all schools financed from public funds. These curricular documents make up the national curriculum. Compulsory subjects and their content are the same for all pupils and students. There is some possibility of creating individual curricula, but such a move must be approved by the Ministry of Education to be valid throughout the country. The general basic curricular documents are: study plans, framework curricula and educational standards.

The Study Plan defines the amount and structure of instruction in different types of school. There are several alternative study plans for the same type of school. Each of the variants defines the number and scale of obligatory and optional subjects. All schools have a choice from different alternative study plans in terms of grades and classes.

The school year comprises about 185–190 days of teaching spread between September and the end of June (July and August – summer holidays). The lessons take 45 minutes and the subjects are spread over five days a week. The minimum and maximum annual numbers of hours of teaching are from 602 to 831.

The classes are coeducational and in general are made up of pupils/students of the same age. The average number of pupils/students per teacher is around 14. The average class size is 21.4. The maximum number of pupils/students per class is 34, except the first grade at basic school, where it is 29 (Educational system... 2005).

The Framework Curricula define the content and its range for each type of school and for each subject. The curriculum for an individual subject consists of: aims (general and concrete), thematic units and their content and recommendations concerning education strategies and pupils' or students' assessment.

Table 7. The number of lessons according to General Study Plans

Type of school		Number of lessons per week								
		grade 1	grade 2	grade 3	grade 4	grade 5	grade 6	grade 7	grade 8	grade 9
Basic School (Isced 1 – 2)	Total	21	22	24	25	26	28	29	29	29
	Optional Subjects	1 - 2	1 - 2	1 - 2	1 - 2	1 - 2	1 - 2	1 - 2	1 - 2	1 - 2
Gymnasia (Isced 3a)	Total	31	31	31	30	-	-	-	-	-
	Optional Subjects	4 - 6	4 - 6	4 - 6	4 - 6	-	-	-	-	-
Vocational secondary school (Isced 3c)	Total	30	34	34	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Optional Subjects	1 - 2	1 - 2	1 - 2	-	-	-	-	-	-

Educational Standards are also devised for each subject of the particular type of school. They have two parts – content standard and performance standard. Although the standards were implemented in the educational system only in the late 1990s, they do not meet current requirements concerning the function of such a document. In actual fact they copy the framework curricula with an additional requirement concerning the level of knowledge pupils or students must achieve. Most of the standards ignore the development of pupils' or students' competences. From that point of view the standards are dysfunctional, and most teachers perceive them as a formal document without any direct impact on the quality of education. What the teachers usually follow instead are the textbooks. In general, the educational process is very textbook-oriented. Teachers are free to use the teaching methods and textbooks of their choice (from a list approved by the Ministry of Education). Because of this, they concentrate their teaching methods on the transmission of information from textbooks to pupils or students. Public discussion about that approach has already been going on for more than 17 years.

Only teachers are responsible for pupil/student assessment. The system of assessment applies to all primary and secondary schools (ISCED 1 – 3) and is realised in a scale of 5 grades (1 is the best). At the lowest grade of basic schools (ISCED 1) there is the possibility of using alternative forms of pupil assessment if the parents request it.. Assessments are organised throughout the school year (written and oral tests). The pupils/students are given a certificate at the end of the first half and at the end of each school year. If a pupil/student fails in two subjects, she/he must repeat all the subjects of the class once again with younger pupils/students during the next school year.

7. Monitoring and Quality Control

The system of monitoring and evaluating the quality of schools and education at national level has not yet been elaborated adequately. There is no national standard for educational quality at different types of school. Since 2003 a complex monitoring system of educational outcomes at basic school has been gradually elaborated under the designation "MONITOR". It is implemented by the National Institute for Education through written tests in the Slovak language (at schools for national minorities the language of instruction) and in mathematics, taken by all students leaving basic school (ninth grade). In April 2007 at 1,466 basic schools 60,280 students in the ninth grade took the tests.

At secondary schools (ISCED 3A) a new school-leaving examination [*maturita*] has been applied since 2004, partly as a means of evaluating the quality of education. The exam includes two parts – internal and external, and has three levels of difficulty. The students are free to choose one level based on their own interests and further study plans. The external form of the exam makes it possible to compare the quality of educational outcomes in secondary schools.

The results of "MONITOR" and the school-leaving exams could be allowed by secondary schools and higher educational institutions as enrolment criteria. But because of the complicated system of school-leaving exams at secondary schools, most of higher educational institutions do not accept them as their main enrolment criterion.

An ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the quality of education takes place in two ways. The first is carried out by school heads. They regularly observe the instructional process in different classes of their school or give different kinds of test to pupils or students. There are no general criteria and indicators of quality; these tests are fully within the competence of administrators (head teachers). This is a form of self-evaluation.

The State School Inspectorate represents an independent form of school and school facility evaluation. It constitutes an authority of the state administration in the field of education with the purpose of controlling the quality of educational management the educational process and the educational environment at schools and school facilities. The State School Inspectorate carries out an independent evaluation of schools, monitors key aspects of education and publishes its findings in the form of surveys. There are 8 inspectional centres all over the country. Their conclusions concerning particular schools are binding.

Slovakia neither has national standards of education quality and quality of schools, nor any complex report or survey about the real state of its educational system. The only relevant documents are the National Reports about the results of international measurements of trends in children's reading ability – PIRLS – carried out in 2001 by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and students' performance in reading, mathematics and science - PISA – carried out by the OECD in 2003 (Slovakia participated for the first time). The results are not very optimistic for the Slovak educational system. They signal

the need for fundamental and complex educational reform.

The measurements show that a Slovak school has a low level of “added value”. This means that it is not able to provide similar levels of school success for children with different backgrounds. Quite the reverse. Differences based on gender or social background are reproduced by the school. Slovakia is among those countries with the highest differences of test results between boys and girls (in favour of boys in mathematics and science, in favour of girls in reading).

One of the most serious findings of the PISA measurement about Slovak schools is the high dependence of children’s test results on their socio-economical background. This means that the Slovak educational system, despite official statements, does not guarantee social equality in the field of education (PISA, 2004). The educational success of the children depends first of all on the level of education received from their parents and their social status. The school actually does not fulfil its compensatory function. It seems that only the kindergarten is able to fulfil this aspect of education under the condition that the child’s school attendance lasts for more than one year.

In most OECD countries the school has a more important effect on the educational results of pupils or students than does their individual socio-economic background. Slovakia belongs to a group of 5 OECD countries with the biggest differences among particular schools.

The problem of raising the quality of education is not only the responsibility of the state administration, but also that of the self-governing authorities of schools and school facilities. They have a wide range of competences which they are not yet able to make full use of.

8. School Autonomy and its Instruments

Simultaneously with the state administration of the school system, the self-administration of the school system works within the law defined by the Act on State Administration and Self-Government. It is understood to be initiative and counselling body, with the objective of expressing local public interests and provide checks at local level. It has an especially strong voice in the process of assessing the candidates for the position of school principal or heads of school facilities. It also presents an opinion about ideas concerning the development and professional orientation of schools and school facilities, about the budget of schools, about the administration and achievements of education. It is organised in a system represented by regional school boards, municipal school boards and school and school facility boards.

9. Educationalists, Particularly Teachers

The main actors in the process of education are the educators and teachers. Their position in the educational system is regulated by law. They are defined

as pedagogical employees with a professional and pedagogical qualification. Teachers from the primary to tertiary level of education (ISCED 1- 5) have to have a qualification at the higher level of university study (a Master's or technical engineering degree). The required qualification of pre-school teachers is at the level of secondary school education (ISCED 3A), but the number of teachers with higher education has been rising. Teachers at primary schools (ISCED 1) are qualified for teaching all the obligatory subjects. The teachers at secondary schools (ISCED 2 – 3) are specialists in two subject areas.

The social status of the teachers is not very high and in recent years has gone down together with the quality of education. The average income in the field of education is lower than the national average income, in spite of the fact that the field of education has one of the highest numbers of employees with a university degree.

10. Support Structures

The structures supporting the educational system consist of the aforementioned school facilities, special education facilities and facilities for education counselling.

School Clubs for Children operate at most basic schools. They fulfil both an educational and a social function, enabling children at the lowest level of basic school a daytime stay at school and to do their homework for the next school day.

Leisure Centres enable children to pursue their leisure interests actively

Diagnostic Centres provide complex psychological and special-pedagogical assessment of maladjusted children placed there on the basis of a court ruling to give them protective education.

Educational and Psychological Advisory Centres offer professional services for schools and families with regard to the education, personal and professional development of children.

11. Social Dimension

Study at all types of state schools is free of charge. At least during their compulsory school attendance pupils and students get textbooks without payment. For pupils and students from small villages without a school, attending the nearest basic school by public transportation, there is a refund of transportation costs by the municipalities. There is also financial support for pupils with a socially disadvantaged background at primary schools. At secondary schools and public higher educational institutions there is a system of social grants for students with good educational results coming from socially weak families.

In kindergartens the parents contribute to the education, meals and teaching aids for their children. In primary and secondary schools and school facilities parents contribute to meal costs; in basic schools of art the parents also cover the tuition fees.

As mentioned above, there is a problem at the pre-school level of education.

Attending kindergartens is not free of charge, though the payment is not high, and for many families the kindergartens are not available. Especially in poor districts with a large Roma populations living in segregated settlements, it could be one of the best ways towards their social inclusion. For this reason, the Ministry of Education started to prepare (2007) legislation allowing five-year-old children to attend kindergarten free of charge.

12. Key Problems and Perspectives

According to the OECD publication "*Economic Survey of the Slovak Republic 2007*" the key problems of the Slovak educational system are characterised as followed: "*Improving education outcomes is vital for achieving convergence with GDP per capita levels in Western European countries and for reducing income inequality. While some education outcomes are favourable, such as the low secondary-school drop-out rate, others have room for improvement: education achievement is below the OECD average and strongly influenced by socio-economic background; Roma children, who are mainly from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, have particularly poor achievement; labour-market outcomes are poor for graduates of secondary vocational programmes not leading to tertiary education; and tertiary attainment is low, albeit rising. Reforms have been made in recent years or are planned to address many of these weaknesses, but much remains to be done. In particular, more progress needs to be made in increasing participation in early childhood education and care, reducing stratification in the education system, helping Roma children to integrate into the education mainstream, and in attracting high quality graduates to teaching, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged schools. In addition, secondary vocational education not leading to tertiary education needs to be made more pertinent to labour-market requirements. Tertiary education also needs to be made more attractive for technical secondary school graduates*" (OECD Economic Surveys 2007).

The Ministry of Education has initiated some professional activities aimed at starting a curricular transformation at basic (ISCED 1 – 2) and secondary (ISCED 3) schools. In July 2007 the National Parliament passed the amendment to the Higher Education Act. Unfortunately, all these activities follow the tradition which has been used for a long time. All the proposed and passed proposals concerning education are based on actual needs, without a serious impact on the quality of the process of education. Root-and-branch educational reform is still not a real national priority.

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