

# Relationships between parents and school in the Czech Republic

*Kateřina Emmerov & Milada Rabuřicov*

Significance of parents for school life and its development is nowadays generally acknowledged in the Czech Republic. Although this trend does not have as long a tradition as in most western European countries, it has achieved its position in contemplation about the quality of the school education and it has been keeping this position for a few past years.

In the field of changes and development of the educational system the second half of the 1990s in the Czech Republic is characterized more by attempts at the inner change of the school than by those at the structural change. As a matter of fact, all the initiatives of the school policy in the few past years aim at these inner changes or at least they mention this issue. The most prominent of the initiatives is the Appeal to 10 Million for the preparation of the National Programme of Development in Education from 1999-2000. The inner changes of school in cooperation with social partners are considerably paid attention to in the National Programme of Development of Education itself, which is also known as the White Book and which was worked out at the end of 2000 after a public discussion. One of the facts that comes out as virtually undoubtable, from the point of view of the principle of democratic decision-making and school management, is the call for the teacher involvement in the whole process of changes at school. Another point which is not doubted is the principle of subsidiarity and the principle of the general requirement of opening the process of changes from below. These principles include the idea of the teacher as the designer of the change. But

what role is ascribed to parents? What is expected from them? In school documents and other various initiatives answers to such questions are not clear at all.

This is one of the reasons why we have started a three-year research project<sup>1</sup> under the name of The Role of Parents as Educational and Social Partners of the School.

## **Roles of parents**

We are interested in parents and the roles they play in the Czech educational system, parents of children at the pre-primary, primary and lower secondary level of education in particular. We aim at parents as necessary designers of upbringing and education of their own children, although they partially delegate their role to school more or less compulsorily. We aim at parents who in the imaginary triangle of the relationships form another necessary apex apart from the child and the teacher. We aim at parents who with their opinions and attitudes, those unspoken and unexpressed as well, substantially influence the work of schools and school changes in general and form a potentially very strong political group.

From the analyses of the so far carried out studies on new conditions of the school development there is a fact coming out that there has not been taken enough complex interest in the role of parents in the educational process in the Czech republic in the 1990s. There are works that focus on the pupil from the point of view of their skills and personal development, there are works that are concerned with the teacher as the designer of

pedagogical changes, works that pay attention to the school management and to the inner and outer relationships of the school, but what is still missing is a work specific and complex at the same time that analyses the position of parents as educational and social partners of the school. However, the Annual Report of the Czech School Inspection for 1996 - 1997, for example, points out the building of the relationship between the school and the family and between the school and the public as one of the main problems of the contemporary school.

Despite all the facts mentioned above, we do not try to deal with this issue without any previous experience. We may partially take into account various studies that were in the past years concentrated, for example, on the parental preparedness to the child's entrance into school (Křišáková, Kováčková, 2001), on the dialogue between the family and the school (Janiš, 2001) or on various suggestions for the cooperation between the school and the family (Krejčová, 2001). But primarily we draw from our own project *Social Change and Education in the Czech Republic (Towards the Relationships between the School and the Family)*<sup>2</sup> which was finished in 1995.

### **Relationships and communications**

In this research we concentrated on the issue of relationships and communication between the school and the family. The starting premise was rooted in considering the communication barrier between these two parties which was caused by the lack of mutual trust and respect. During the research we concentrated on the mutual perception of the two parties engaged (how they perceive each other), on their expectations, their evaluation criteria (what criteria are involved in the parents' judgment of the school quality, what criteria are involved in the teachers' judgment of the parental care) and on their shared activities. In the conclusion we had to state that 'the quality of communication and co-operation between the school and parents was not very satisfactory', that 'the schools nowadays were in the phase of

gradual opening and cautious search for the ways of approaching the parents of their pupils' and that 'there were attempts and partial initiatives from both sides but their effectiveness was to be doubted' (Rabušicová, Pol, 1996). The published results of the research were positively replied to by many pedagogues and they were also cited rather often. This fact justifies our idea that the pedagogical public considers this issue to be topical and necessary. This is also the reason why we would like to work on this issue further on and develop it.

The trend of changes in the Czech educational system, which began in the 1990s, continues. The topic of parents in relation to school is still an issue which is considered one of the headstones in building good educational environment for children. This is also the reason why we come back to this issue, from a different point of view, after six years again. This year we have started a three-year research project under the name of *The Role of Parents as Educational and Social Partners of the School*. Parents as *educational partners* of the school are defined as individuals and groups entering relationships with the school because they are interested in their children, their upbringing and education. Parents as *social partners* are defined as individuals and groups entering relationships with the school because they are interested in the development of the school as an institution.

The whole project was led by the attempt at understanding all potentialities, duties and rights of the parents as essential actors in the process of education of their own children in relation to the school. The goal is to contribute to the answers to questions connected with the role of parents as educational and social partners of the school. We are interested in the extend to which the real situation in the position of parents in relation to the school is compatible with various theoretical sources and in what activities may support and develop parents' position in schools. We are interested in the question to what extend the

actual situation of the position of parents in relation to the school corresponds to these and other theoretical sources. That is why we put the following questions:

1. What role is ascribed to parents by schools and how exactly is this role defined?
2. To what extent can we talk about the educational partnership and to what extent about the social partnership?
3. Are there any differences in defining the role of parents as educational and social partners in the kindergarten and at the first and at the second stage of the primary school?
4. What role do the parents ascribe to themselves in relation to school?
5. Are there any differences in the way in which their own role is defined in relation to school by parents of children in the kindergartens and at the first and at the second stage of the primary schools?
6. Are there any differences in attitudes of schools to parents and in attitudes of parents to schools in the country and in urban agglomerations? Can such attitudes enrich one another?
7. What, from the point of view of parental participation in the school education, can already existing projects focusing on developing the communication with parents and the public bring about to others?
8. Is it possible to think about school as a centre for lifelong learning of adults: parents and the general public?
9. Is it possible to think about school as a centre for supporting the good work of the family?
10. What chance is a parent as an individual given of putting through their ideas about education against the school? How and to what extent do individual parents use such chances?
11. What chance are parents as a group given of putting through their ideas about education against the school (and against other more powerful school institutions)? How and to what extent do parents use such chances?

12. To what extent are parents influenced in their attitudes to school by reflection of the contemporary school in the media?

The methodological frame of the project includes the processing of the existing theoretical framework about the role of parents in the educational system both from the Czech sources and from the abroad sources in particular.

Next there will be the observation and analysis of the contemporary situation concerning the role of parents in the educational process in the kindergartens and at the first and at the second stage of the primary schools. There will be used the whole set of methods of quantitative and qualitative research:

- Content analysis of the school legislature, school documents and the existing knowledge about the role of parents in the educational system in this country and in abroad (particularly in Britain, in the Scandinavian countries and in the Netherlands where is this issue rather traditional).
- Content analysis of the reflection of schools in the media taking the observed issue into account.
- Questionnaire survey of a representative sample of the Czech kindergartens and primary schools. Questionnaires will be given to parents and school managers (if need be to teachers). The questionnaires will also include the same batteries of questions which will enable the comparison of both views - pedagogical and parental - of the observed issue.
- Individual and group interviews (using the method of 'focus group' - asking questions and recording the discussion in a group) with parents and pedagogues, with members of the Union of Parents and also with members of other associations of parents.
- Case study of a selected school, if need be of more schools, taking the observed issue into account (the identification of schools will result from the preceding questionnaire survey).

### Conclusion

During the first year we have been already managing the problem theoretically. We have based it on studying the relevant works published in the Czech Republic and in abroad. We have processed inspirational models of the parental role in the educational systems in selected countries. We try to get a wider - complex and contextual- view of the issue of parental partnership in relation to the school. This is the reason why we now concentrate on two areas which, in our point of view, help create this kind of context. It is the legislative framework that constitutes the basis for potentialities and ways of establishing and developing partnership and it is also the media framework that influences input ideas and expectations of parents who are to enter the relationships with the school.

We have analyzed the Czech legislature taking into account the parents' position which is ascribed to them in laws and other legal documents. If we take into consideration the exact content of the Czech legislature, we may divide it into two areas, namely educational partnership and social partnership. In the first case the partnership nearly overlaps with a 'customer attitude'. Only in the second case, that of the social partnership, there is possible support in the legislature, namely in the school boards. On the other hand, we know that the school boards are very rare. No matter whether we regard the parents as problems, customers or partners of the school, we may always find a certain inclination

to one of these models in many legislative formulations. The parental partnership which we consider the desirable model may only be found in the *White Book*.

We have also analyzed selected media taking into account the various ways of presenting information about schools and the school system to the parents and the general public<sup>3</sup>. The media context is not favorable to the school issues, and the teachers in particular, at all. Issues connected with the school system and education are rare and their evaluation is mostly negative. The public, including the parents, has to find their way in the generally negative reflection so that it is not an obstacle for them in everyday communication with their school partners, which doesn't have to be easy.

Next year we are going to prepare and realize the questionnaire survey and process the results. After that we want to complete the obtained information by more sensitive qualitative methods in selected schools - individual and group interviews with parents and pedagogues. In the third year of working on the project we intend to realize case studies of selected schools and process the overall results of the project. Hopefully, we will be able to present results of our project at next ERNAPE conference and in such a way at least partially contribute to widening the range of knowledge about such an important point, which the parents in relation to the school certainly are, in the case of the Czech Republic in particular.

### Notes

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