



Czech Republic takes new measures to improve the inclusion of Roma children in mainstream education

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In the Czech Republic, the challenge of including Roma children in mainstream education was addressed by adoption of a framework for inclusive education in 2015. Since January 2016, this has been followed by the adoption of implementation measures, which include supportive measures and their financing, methodology and teaching staff training.

Description

In the Czech Republic, appropriate inclusion of Roma children in mainstream education has been a long-standing challenge. Following a basic psychological diagnostic assessment of their learning ability, Roma children were disproportionately placed in special/practical schools or classes and educated according to an education programme for pupils with “mild mental disability” (lehké mentální postižení [LMP]). According to available estimates, the proportion of Roma children placed in such schools/classes has decreased only slightly during the past years: from 35% in school year 2009/2010 (Česká školní 2010) to 30.6% in school year 2015/6; This latter percentage is 11 times higher than in the case of non-Roma children (Česká školní 2015, own computations).

In this respect, a recent European Commission Staff Working Document on the Czech Republic (EC 2016), in line with previous reports, emphasised persisting inequalities in education. In its 2007 ruling “D.H. and others versus Czech Republic”, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) stated that Roma children were being exposed to discrimination in the Czech Republic, and called for corrective action.

A key legislative and programme framework for inclusive education was adopted in 2015, followed by several implementation measures adopted from

January 2016 onwards. The Amendment to the Education bill, adopted in 2015, stipulated the principles of inclusive education. In August 2015, the government also adopted the Inclusive Education Action Plan 2016-2018, which brought concrete proposals for supportive measures. In January 2016, a new Decree on education of pupils with special educational needs and of gifted learners was adopted. It specifies the implementation measures and will come into effect as from September 2016. The Decree was accompanied by a Catalogue of supportive measures to be provided to the pupils with special educational needs and the related rules. During February-April 2016, the Ministry of Youth, Education and Sports (MYES) adopted other implementing documents concerning the education programme for primary schools, specifying the supportive measures and their financing.

The new approach insists that pupils with special educational needs should preferably be educated together with other pupils, with support specified in Individual Education Plans (in particular support from a teaching assistant assigned to them). In mid-April 2016, an Expert team on conjoint education was established to supervise, support and assess the implementation of the measures and their quality. Finally, a call for proposals was announced to schools, promising to provide schools with about €167 million for inclusive education measures during 2016-2018.

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Outlook & Commentary

There is some controversy in the Czech Republic related to the new policy drift towards inclusive education. First, there is some aversion to the new measures among the teaching staff: mainly special/practical schools are raising their voice against them. Secondly, the staff at mainstream schools are often afraid of the additional demands on them resulting from the new methods of education. Thirdly, some psychologists from pedagogical counselling centres support the view that channelling Roma children into the "special" education stream is better than pushing them into "normal" classes, both for the sake of the Roma children's education and well-being and for the sake of the other children, especially those who have better learning abilities. The most often raised argument is that the inclusion into mainstream education may harm the self-esteem of Roma children and their motivation to learn, while more gifted learners will be slowed down. Moreover, it is argued that the well-functioning practical schools for pupils with mild mental disability will suffer, as will also the pupils themselves. Finally, the argument is being made that the teaching staff is not prepared for the reform and that no assessment based on a pilot project was provided. The political opposition, which had not adopted such systematic measures of inclusive education before 2013 when it lost its mandate, joined the critique (MYES 2016).

Given the controversy surrounding the measures and the short implementation time horizon, the potential real impact is uncertain. To some extent, the measures adopted build on the practical experience gained during the 2007-2013 EU programme period, when some inclusive education measures were implemented and financed through the European Social Fund. In particular, there has been positive practical experience, amongst the actors involved in inclusive education, of the role of the teaching assistants. On the other hand, no systematic evaluations were carried out to examine the effectiveness of such measures. There is also a certain risk of implementation deficits since there was not much time for preparation, including education of the teaching staff. One of the crucial questions in the implementation process will be how skilful the pedagogical diagnostic centres will be in formulating the Individual Education Plans and in tailoring them adequately to the needs of the children. Lastly, the effects on educational performance/school results can be expected to occur in the longer-term only, while procedural effects will possibly be obvious within one school year. Thorough assessment of the implementation of the measures will be necessary. It is crucial to ensure the long-term financial sustainability of these key measures (including the use of teaching assistants) aimed at making the education system more inclusive.

Further reading

Country Report Czech Republic 2016. Brussels, 26.2.2016
SWD(2016) 73 final. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/cr2016_czech_en.pdf

Česká školní inspekce/ Czech School Inspection (CSI) 2010. Průběžná informace z kontrolní činnosti v byvalých zvláštních školách. [Interim Report on Monitoring Inspections at Former Practical Schools]

Česká školní inspekce/Czech School Inspection (CSI) 2015. Tematická zpráva: Žáci vzdělávání v jednotlivých vzdělávacích programech základního vzdělávání. [Thematic Report: Children Educated under Individual Curricula in Basic Education]

Materials on inclusive education at MYES web portal: <http://www.msmt.cz/o-webu-msmt/spolecne-vzdelavani>

MYES 2016. Reakce ministryně školství na vyjádření předsedy ODS [Response of the Minister of Education to the Comment by ODS Party Chairman] Press release, 7 April. <http://www.msmt.cz/ministerstvo/ovinar/reakce-ministryne-skolstvi-kateriny-valachove-na-predsedu>

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