

## Discussion of the Secondary School System in Czechoslovakia Following the Second World War

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*This article considers the views of supporters and opponents of the introduction of a unified secondary school system in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

Key words: *School system, unified school, Czechoslovakia*

The nature of secondary schools was subject to criticism from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards. More than a hundred years ago, T. G. Masaryk called for reform to the secondary school system, seeing specific flaws in their disunity and excessive intellectualism, the neglect for upbringing focusing on emotion and willpower, the excessive burden imposed on pupils, the priority given to detailed facts at the expense of thought, the absence of a unifying spirit, the neglect of the natural and social sciences, and insufficient moral upbringing.<sup>1</sup>

Reforms to secondary education were, of course, also the subject of discussion among those working in education. As early as 1919, the Ministry of Education conducted a poll, the results of which were published in 1922. In the same year, the State Press published a treatise by secondary school professors Jan Čeněk and Přemysl Hájek entitled *The Reform of the Secondary School System*. Čeněk warned that “to lower the educational standard of the secondary school system for unhealthy ideological reasons in order to serve the broadest possible classes means reducing the cultural level of the nation as a whole. It must not be forgotten that it is not even possible for all levels of society in the nation to receive a higher education.”<sup>2</sup> He rejected the claim that the existing secondary schools only served the children of wealthy parents, and stated that, on the contrary, Czech secondary schools were filled with the children of poor parents and that a number of leading intellectuals had grown up in poor backgrounds. In 1930, in the book *A Hundred Opinions on the Secondary School System*, E. Čapek presented the results of a poll in which the majority were against a unified school system. František Chudoba, for example, expressed concerns about the

<sup>1</sup> Masaryk, T. G. (1926): *Jak pracovat. Přednášky z roku 1898*. Praha.

<sup>2</sup> Čeněk, J. – Hájek, P. (1922): *K reformě střední školy*. Praha, p. 7.

uniformity of the school system, as uniformity of all kinds tends to have a deadening effect, both on the individual and on the nation as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

In the nineteen thirties, in their action plan *What the Socialists Want*, the social democrats grouped around the Labour Academy demanded a unified school system differentiated according to the capabilities and needs of the pupil and incorporating all schools into a unified system with the greatest possible chance of crossover. Compulsory school attendance would be extended to the age of sixteen. According to the socialists, education was the right of all people, not the privilege of a few.<sup>4</sup>

After the Second World War, President Edvard Beneš entered into the extremely intensive discussions of the secondary school system in his speeches to teachers and other members of school staff in 1947. The President called for the implementation of a unified school system to be free of dogmatic bias and for scope to be left for changes in the light of later experience and according to the diversity of procedural conditions. He therefore recommended early differentiation with a view to the varying talent of pupils and directed towards their future employment.

In his speech to a deputation of secondary school professors at the Association of Employees in Education on 19 March 1947, the President declared that he was not against the reforms, but hoped that the reforms would be most carefully considered in theoretical terms, proven in practice, and prepared by qualified experts working in co-operation.<sup>5</sup> He acknowledged the importance of the secondary school system that had, in its form to that time, shaped the intelligence of the Czech nation, both for life and for university studies. He noted the fact that the foundations of this system had been laid a hundred years previously and that reform was, therefore, necessary, with the words that, "Only that part of it that really needs to be reformed must be reformed... this should not be the kind of levelling out that would result in the average, or even something below average, becoming the norm."<sup>6</sup> He warned against imitating either the West or the East and against the urge to implement solutions "that we will have to change tomorrow or the day after tomorrow".<sup>7</sup> He demanded the early differentiation of pupils according to talent and ability, as in his view the natural inequality and dissimilarity between people was an evident fact. He noted that public opinion had been thrown off balance by the war and the May Revolution, and that this also expressed itself in

<sup>3</sup> Čapek, E. (1930): *Sto hlasů o střední škole*. Praha.

<sup>4</sup> *Co chtějí socialisté (1934)*. Praha: Dělnická akademie, pp. 44–47.

<sup>5</sup> Beneš, E. (1947): *O školské reformě*. Praha: Pokrok, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

the assessment of issues associated with the reform of the school system.

On 5 April 1947, Beneš told representatives of the teaching staff at the faculty of arts and sciences in Prague that the reforms to the secondary school system should probably consist of differentiation according to the pupil's talent from year three of lower school following two years of a common foundation. At upper secondary school, this differentiation would then intensify up to its direct introduction into studies at university. Universities, according to Beneš, must state precisely what they are to give the secondary school graduate, and the secondary school must do everything possible to ensure that its graduates do not have to bridge an enormous gulf between secondary school and university. He drew attention to the necessity of teaching two foreign languages (one western language and Russian) at lower secondary school.

During a talk with a group of school reform workers led by Chancellor of Charles University Bohumil Bydžovský on 23 April 1947, the President noted that he considered the principle of a unified school system essentially right and feasible in this country. He expressed the wish that all reforms be made following agreement among the widest possible range of interested parties.

He told the deputation from the Association of Employees in Education received by the President on 25 April 1947 that differentiation should take place at an early stage. He spoke out against the hasty and hurried negotiation of such an important issue. The President was not, then, against a unified school system, but demanded its differentiation.

In contrast to the President, who was forced to use diplomatic language, others engaged in the discussions expressed their opinions on a unified school system much more openly. In July 1945, the psychologist Robert Konečný demanded that the plan of a unified school system be abandoned. "Let us have the secondary school as a separate type with Latin from the first year, a strictly select type, a type for the elite talented people. Let it, of course, be open to all without difference so long as they satisfy the demands of an extraordinary education... Otherwise we will be back where we started, with studied semi-intelligence issuing forth in an enormous quantity, neither fish nor fowl."<sup>8</sup>

The creation of a unified undifferentiated level-two school system was, according to the draft of the primary school law, to lead to the end of the existing lower secondary schools. Teachers at primary and junior secondary schools, in particular, were in favour of a unified school

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<sup>8</sup> *Svobodné noviny*, 10. 7. 1945.

system. In contrast, the cultural community and the teaching staff and principals of secondary schools, almost without exception, were against an undifferentiated unified school system. Parent's associations at secondary schools were also against a unified school system.

The principal promoter of the unified school system was František Kahuda, who worked at that time at the Educational Research Institute and who was later to be communist Minister of Education in the years 1956–1963. He claimed that a unified school system would contribute towards maintaining the unity of the nation, and that previously only the rich had been able to study. Zdeněk Nejedlý, communist Minister of Education in the years 1945–1946, stated that the purpose of a unified school system was, “to ensure the disappearance of the impossible division of the young, when a decision is made of a ten-year-old boy as to whether he is or is not to be a gentleman. This is the main reason for a unified school system and for a unified second level.”<sup>9</sup>

Opponents of a unified school system after the war drew attention to the fact that after abolishing the lower secondary schools, the Communist Party would also eliminate the existing higher secondary colleges and introduce an entire unified secondary school system (i.e. levels two and three). And, in fact, the July assembly of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1973 approved a project for a new educational system that anticipated the greatest possible integration of secondary general education schools, secondary vocational schools and secondary vocational colleges.

According to a number of newspaper articles published after the war the whole of our past up until 9 May 1945 had been worthless. Everything in the past was bad, old-fashioned, reactionary, asocial and undemocratic. True happiness came only with the May Revolution. Even education in the 1<sup>st</sup> Czechoslovak Republic was allegedly worthless, to say nothing of Old Austria, for which reason it was essential to reform it at all cost. Anyone brave enough to say there was anything good in the old times was declared a reactionary. The demagogic lies to the effect that only the socially strong had formerly received an education and that “the less talented pupil born to rich parents... received better grades than a socially weak, though more talented, pupil” were frequently repeated.<sup>10</sup>

The spiritual father of the unified, though differentiated, school was Václav Příhoda, though the communists no longer talked of differentiation, but made it plain that the unified undifferentiated school would be

<sup>9</sup> Mertlík, R. (1947): *Nebezpečí jednotné školy*. Praha: Václav Petr, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Svobodné noviny*, 17. 9. 1946.

implemented whether anyone liked it or not. The claim that the unified level-two school (i.e. the amalgamation of the former junior secondary school with the first four years of grammar school) would provide pupils with the broadest and most profound education was open to immediate doubt in view of the fact that it was not to teach the ancient languages. Hynek Vysoký had previously spoken out against the restriction of Latin and Greek, as our entire culture was based on ancient culture like a granite pillar, and there could be no true education without this culture.

A number of teachers, mostly secondary school professors, noted that the undifferentiated level-two school would be an educational and social injustice to the pupils and would not give talented pupils what their talent and ability demanded. The unified school would also not create the right conditions for pupils to gain a solid grounding in linguistic education at an age at which the memory is more open to the teaching of foreign languages.

The greatest mistake in the preparation of school reform was that it became a political issue. The second basic mistake was that the reform was prepared, for the large part, by teachers who had no experience of secondary schools of the grammar school type, i.e. teachers from junior secondary schools who had studied at an institute of teacher training following junior secondary school. The proposal from the reform committee meant, in all practical terms, the abolition of the existing levels of secondary school.

An alternative proposal was put forward in May 1946 by Václav Hlavatý, who recommended introducing two joint years of unified level-two school, which would be divided into two branches in years three and four. The first branch would provide an education for practical life for those who did not intend to continue their studies, while the second would prepare pupils for further studies. The division of pupils into the two branches would be conditional to the results they had achieved in previous years.<sup>11</sup>

Another solution that would eliminate or alleviate the flaws of the unified undifferentiated school was drawn up by secondary school professor Jan Čeněk. His proposal envisaged the level-two school having three years of unified undifferentiated school providing a closed universal education. Year four would then be differentiated and specialised according to the future occupation of the pupil.<sup>12</sup>

Others attempted to eliminate the disadvantages of the undifferentiated unified level-two school by means of internal differentiation, i.e. by dividing

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<sup>11</sup> *Svobodné noviny*, 30. 5. 1946.

<sup>12</sup> *Naše doba*, 52, 1946, p. 241.

classes into groups according to the talent and interests of the pupils, with a single teacher teaching joint periods. National socialist Minister of Education in the years 1946–1948 Jaroslav Stránský recommended that joint basic instruction for pupils from the ages of eleven to fifteen be supplemented by a system of optional subjects, giving talented pupils at least some of the necessary preparation for level three. Such optional subjects might include, for example, a foreign language, Latin, laboratory exercises, etc.

In his book *The Dangers of the Unified School*, Rudolf Mertlík drew attention to the problem of foreign languages. He stated that the post-revolutionary enthusiasm for Russian had faded among practically all pupils, “and not merely faded; many have developed a hostility to it, as no one can fail to see that Russian is taking the place of Protectorate German... in addition to which it is taught with an ideological bias and taken on a certain official hallmark.”<sup>13</sup> He also noted that German was being forgotten and drew attention to the fact that pupils graduating from the traditional grammar schools in the times of Old Austria were truly knowledgeable and educated, as these kinds of school had not be subjected to the introduction of various systems of education. The traditional grammar school had not worried about what any particular individual would need in practice, but first and foremost provided an education.

In 1945, František Novotný stated in *Národní Obroda* (National Revival) that to say that the organisation of our secondary school system was a hundred years old did not, in itself, mean very much, as the democratic system, for example, itself dated back to the fifth century before Christ. He also considered the phrase the nationalisation of education unfortunate, as education could not be nationalised in the same way as coalmines or banks. Education had to be “earned” by the work of each individual. He stated that radical reform to the school system would be an experiment that would come at a high price, and that its implementation would be followed by a period of gradual reversal approaching the original situation.<sup>14</sup>

The idea of the undifferentiated unified level-two school, as presented by the communists, was rejected by the school workers of the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party and the Czechoslovak People's Party, who in the summer of 1946 demanded a differentiated level two. Negotiations on the primary school law, accompanied by much

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<sup>13</sup> Mertlík, R. p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> *Národní obroda*, 14. 7. 1945.

demagogy, were not to end until April 1948, when the communists had a free hand to introduce the unified undifferentiated level-two school following the February coup.