

# 20 years of the Czech Educational Research Association: History and challenges <sup>1</sup>

Jan Průcha

an independent expert

## 1 The establishment and development of CERA

The paper aims to introduce the history and present of Czech Educational Research Association (CERA). The first part describes the reasons why and conditions under which CERA was established. In the second part we depict the current state of Czech educational research as evident in representative publications. The third part presents deliberations on the future development of Czech educational research and CERA.

CERA was officially established on 21 May 1992 at the Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague. One might think it was simple, however, the specific conditions under which the establishment took place must be considered. From 1990 to 1992 Czech society went through a process of major economic and political transformations which also influenced the position of educational science:

- *In general, educational science was in a very poor condition at that time.* Theory of educational science was discredited during the communist regime and a new, still developing theory was just gradually catching up with the development in other countries. Educational science was regarded as less prestigious by members of other scientific communities.
- *Empirical research of educational reality was missing.* For instance, only two research papers were published in *Pedagogika* journal during the two years following the velvet revolution even though the journal was published six times per year.
- *No handbook of educational research methodology was available* – which is completely different from the current state as there are several excellent

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books on methodology available now (Gavora, 2000; Pelikán, 2007; Chráška, 2007; Švaříček & Šedová et al., 2007).

- *A generation of young researchers was missing.* The interest in doctoral studies in the field of educational science was low. We were worried whether educational research would find its followers in the new generation.

Nevertheless, some of us studied findings and methods of educational research abroad intensively and published information about it: Especially J. Mareš who introduced the issue of measurement of classroom climate, S. Štech who informed about the psychology of learning which was developed in France, J. Průcha with publications on educational research abroad – mainly Western Europe and the United States (1992).

In this situation I felt it was necessary to establish an organizational platform that would aim to support Czech educational research. I was inspired mainly by Finland and other countries. I was also influenced by my participation at the annual AERA conference (American Educational Research Association, 1991, Chicago). This was the starting point for preparations leading to the establishment of the association. I approached several of my colleagues at the beginning of 1992 whom I professionally and personally trusted and who were willing to participate in the establishment of the association. At the same time I sent letters to faculties of education at different Czech universities with information on the association and its aims and with an invitation to cooperation.

*The founding assembly, with 160 participants, took place on 21 May 1992.* After a rather stormy discussion – in which some of the participants, especially representatives of the reform initiatives, argued for the association to be focused primarily on helping teachers, not on research – CERA was established. First members of the CERA commission were elected: P. Byčkovský, J. Kalous, J. Mareš, S. Navrátil, J. Průcha, S. Štech, and E. Walterová. I was elected the first CERA chairperson.

The association had to be registered at the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic. It was necessary to present statutes of the association which I formulated immediately (they are still valid, however, they are to be updated). CERA was officially registered on 28 May 1992. CERA started its activity with 168 registered members from 42 institutions from the Czech Republic.

One of the main activities of CERA was to be the organization of annual conferences on educational research which would provide a platform for the presentation of research results of different institutions. *The First national conference concerning educational research* was organised in the year after the establishment of CERA and its proceedings were published (1993). The conference was of great importance for the development of educational research in the Czech Republic. This was supported by the presence of official guests – the minister of education P. Piřha and the rector of Charles university R. Palouř. The dean of the Faculty of Education, Charles University J. Kotásek also highlighted the importance of educational research in his speech when he stated:

No matter how sceptical the public, political leaders or members of other scientific communities are about the state and the possibilities of educational research, it is indisputably an internationally accepted and respected reality that the reform and innovation in the education system is unthinkable and unrealistic without systematic research work. (*Proceedings of the first CERA conference*, 1993, p. 14)

The principle of *conference rotation* was included in the CERA policy, i.e. each year the conference was to be organized at a different faculty of education. The reason for this was to stimulate the development of research at different faculties, and also to enable participants from all over the Czech Republic to become familiar with research results and members of the particular faculty. This aim has been accomplished so far as there were two CERA conferences at each of the nine faculties of education, at some of them even three times (Brno, Prague). It is noteworthy that the proceedings were published after each of the conferences, in recent years electronically.

A significant innovation of the conferences, which have the format usual abroad, are the *methodological seminars* for PhD. students. The seminars were organised at the 8<sup>th</sup> conference (2000) in Liberec for the first time and since then methodological lectures and seminars, which are very popular with PhD. students and other participants, take place after each conference.

CERA got involved in international cooperation soon after its establishment. It became one of the twelve founding national associations which established the European Educational Research Association (EERA). As the representative of CERA, I signed the founding document of EERA in 1994 in Strasbourg.

Altogether, ten committees have led CERA in its twenty-year-long existence and five colleagues have held the position of the chairperson. These were: J. Průcha (1992–1996), M. Chráska (1996–2002), B. Kraus (2002–2004), M Rabušicová (2004–2008), and P. Urbánek (2008–present).

We must not forget to mention that all chairpersons and committee members have always carried out their functions free of charge, which surely deserves our gratitude.

## 2 CERA and current achievements of Czech educational research

I will not appraise the general condition of Czech educational research, however desirable it may seem as monitoring and evaluation of research should be an essential part of educational science. The last critical evaluation was recently published by T. Janík (2010) and I shall refer the readers to this paper. Janík dealt with both the evaluation of the state of research and some issues concerning developing *educational knowledge*.<sup>2</sup> I will focus – maybe unorthodoxly – on the positives in order to draw our attention to the good things that we have achieved in the 20 years after the establishment of CERA. I shall only review the results of empirical research, not methodological and theoretical work where positive outcomes were, of course, achieved too.

I believe that the most important feature of the current state of Czech educational research can be considered the fact that three excellent centres of educational research have been established. These centres are (in alphabetical order): Department of Educational Sciences (Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno), Institute for Research and Development of Education (Faculty of Education, Charles University, Prague), Institute for Research in School Education (Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno).

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<sup>2</sup> This important concept should not go unnoticed when evaluating research results. Janík defines it as *the summary of theoretical and practical knowledge of educational problems that stems from different sources, especially from research findings* (p. 15). The question is what is (or what should be) the proportion or importance of research findings in the whole complex of educational knowledge.

I consider the centres excellent for the following reasons:

- 1) Especially due to their *original empirical research*, that reaches the international level, and its publications (see below).
- 2) The centres use *new methods* of quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method research such as multiple-case studies of schools or video studies of instruction.
- 3) The centres guarantee and publish *journals* of excellent quality: *Studia paedagogica, Orbis scholae, Pedagogická orientace*
- 4) All centres *educate PhD. students* and involve them in their research and publications.
- 5) All centres maintain contact with *research institutions abroad* and cooperate with experts from other countries.

The high quality of production of these centres is undoubtedly connected to the excellent research and managerial work of its leaders, i.e., prof. M. Pol, prof. E. Walterová, and associate prof. T. Janík, who managed to create and motivate productive research teams. I would like to highlight the following achievements of educational research of these and other departments<sup>3</sup>:

*(A) A complex analysis of Czech basic school*

The monograph called *Czech basic school. A Multiple Case Study* (Dvořák et al., 2010) has provided the most thorough analysis of current Czech basic school so far. It is based on field research in several types of basic schools and, using the original method of a multiple case study, it sheds light on characteristics of schools, teachers, students and teaching. Another two original monographs also relate to this issue: *Two worlds of basic school? The pitfalls of the transition from the first stage to the second stage* (Walterová et al., 2011) and *The school system – A (non-)public affair? Public views of school and education* (Walterová et al., 2010). Especially the latter provides the most thorough information about the public opinion on school education in the Czech Republic. I especially appreciate empirical findings on *small schools* (Trnková, Knotová, & Chaloupková, 2010). Educational researchers

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<sup>3</sup> I have selected only the most important published research findings from recent years, i.e. especially after 2008. More detailed overview of Czech educational research findings between 2001 and 2008 is included in Janík et al. (2009).

have not been interested in this phenomenon so far, even though the number of small schools is about 1400 in the Czech Republic (i.e. the majority of all primary schools).

### *(B) Analysis of real processes of functioning of basic schools*

Research studies that use the method of video studies to analyse the process of instruction have proved to be very useful. Following the constitutive methodology monograph of Janík and Miková (2006), the method of video study was applied in the analyses of the teaching/learning processes in different school subjects (physics, English, geography, physical education) – summarised in Najvar et al. (2011). For the first time, the current profile of teaching activities and opportunities to learn in classrooms was studied objectively and in detail. This also relates to the research study on *classroom communication* (Šedová, Švaříček, & Šalamounová, 2012) which was carried out in lessons of different school subjects using mixed methodology. Excellent research findings concerning the issue of *psychosocial classroom and school climate* (Linková, 2005; Grecmanová, 2008; Ježek et al., 2003, 2004, 2005) and *climate among school staff* (Urbánek, 2005) were also published.

### *(C) Analysis of curriculum and schoolbooks*

The curriculum of school education (primary, secondary and other levels) was neglected by researchers in the Czech Republic for a long time. It is encouraging that members of the Faculty of Education in Brno, initiated by Prof. J. Maňák, together with researches from other institutions are devoted to this issue nowadays. Their results have been presented in several monographs, especially in *The quality of curriculum and instruction: Research approaches and instruments* (Janík, Najvar, & Kubiátko et al., 2011). Research on *schoolbooks* began developing again after years of stagnation. It provides useful analytical findings on characteristics of text and on construction of this educational media (the work of P. Knecht and other members of the IRSE team – e.g. Knecht & Janík et al., 2008). Other two excellent monographs dealt with *the use of textbooks* by pupils (Červenková, 2010) or by teachers (Sikorová, 2010). These were published at the Faculty of Education in Ostrava.

Besides the three most important centres mentioned above, noteworthy research results have been accomplished at other institutions too – faculties

of education, arts, science etc. I must mention Prof. J. Mareš from the Faculty of Medicine, Charles University (Hradec Králové) who has been an extraordinary figure of the Czech educational research for many years. His numerous publications not only enrich the methodological “arsenal” of Czech educational science, but also bring original findings based on empirical research on different topics from *psychology of learning* – most recently in his extensive monograph *Educational psychology* (Mareš, 2012).

Many studies have been published on the issue of *teacher education*. They focus primarily on evaluation of pre-service teacher education, attitudes of student teachers toward the teaching profession, their educational knowledge, problems in in-service teacher education etc. (valuable work of H. Lukášová, V. Spilková, V. Švec). Professiographic analyses provide useful information on the actual content of teachers’ day-to-day work (Blížkovský, Kučerová, & Kurelová, 2000; Urbánek 2005; Burkovičová, Göbelová, & Seberová, 2011). Due to the high number of related publications, I shall refer the readers to the overview of research on teacher education in Janík et al. (2009). Empirical findings regarding teachers’ educational needs have also been published recently (Starý et al., 2012).

Educational research also expands into areas which have remained largely unexplored so far, such as *school culture*, a phenomenon little known until recently (Pol et al., 2005). *Intergenerational learning* (Rabušicová, Kamanová, & Pevná, 2011) is also a newly researched issue. Original research in the area of multicultural education was conducted by Hladík (2011). Other studies concentrate on the value orientation concerning education of *parents of Romani students* (Kaleja, 2011). Also the phenomenon of mobbing in the school environment received research attention for the first time in the Czech Republic (Čech, 2011).

When it comes to achievements of Czech educational research, we must not forget studies on the borderline between educational science and sociology that deal with the issue of *inequality* and *equity* in education, (especially the work of Greger and Straková, in Matějů, Straková, & Veselý, 2010).

It is beneficial that the Czech educational research has begun to deal with issues of *adult education* in recent years. The hypothetical boundaries between pedagogy and andragogy are cut across by empirical analyses of adults’ participation in formal and informal education, professional education

of adults, education of seniors etc. (especially Rabušicová & Rabušic, 2008; Novotný, 2009). There are some studies focusing on the research of pupils', students' or teachers' competencies, which are based on the theoretical clarification of the competence issues as discussed in the monograph of Veteška and Tureckiová (2008). *Andragogical didactics* provides new impulses for educational research (Mužík, 2010). A number of individual research studies are published in the proceedings of CERA conference and in monothematic issues of *Orbis scholae* (e.g. *School evaluation*, 4/2010), *Studia paedagogica* (e.g. *The phenomenon of time in education*, 1/2010) and in studies in *Pedagogická orientace* journal. It is noteworthy that high quality research is conducted within some *PhD. dissertation projects*, too. This is documented, for example, in the nine volumes of proceedings from the conference for Ph.D. students organized by the Faculty of Education in Olomouc. These proceedings (usually edited by J. Poláchová-Vašátková) include some original research.

There is more positive news: A new research centre is being set up at the Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlín. The centre aims to set up research projects especially in the field of education (with the help of experts from Slovakia – P. Gavora and A. Wiegerová). It would be possible to name many other smaller research studies which are conducted at faculties or other institutions – CERA conference proceedings, journal articles and monographs prove this. However, we cannot elaborate on these here. Nevertheless, one can ask what the relationship between these achievements of educational research and CERA is. Of course I do not suggest that the progress of educational research in the Czech Republic is a direct consequence of CERA activity. However, it is indisputable that CERA contributes to the development of Czech educational research. CERA enables projects and research studies to be presented at its annual conferences and to be published in its proceedings which can motivate other researchers.

### **3 Deliberation on the future development of Czech educational research and CERA**

Even though I evaluate the development of Czech educational research positively, both the findings and the methodology applied, it is important to think about the possibilities for further improvement of research activities.

It is not possible to list all arising tasks which could be set for educational research. I shall just focus on several “programme” matters.<sup>4</sup>

When I go through the numerous findings of partial research studies, the lack of synthesizing works is apparent. Current educational research provides a number of separate studies on individual phenomena of educational reality in the school context. However, there is little effort to connect these isolated findings into a complex theory. It seems that we are rushed by our desire to explore more and more educational phenomena (which is natural in science) but we do not force ourselves to construct a higher complex of knowledge based on these partial findings. Moreover, we do not systematically generate either descriptive summaries or overviews of existing research as it is common abroad.<sup>5</sup>

This relates to another feature of the Czech context – the inability to contribute to precise decisions of policy makers in education. Even though the aim to *influence educational policy* has been included in the CERA programme from the beginning, it has never been fulfilled. It is true that some of our colleagues are (or were) actively involved in this matter (particularly S. Štěch, K. Rýdl, J. Kalous, J. Straková, P. Urbánek and others). Nonetheless, politicians and school administrators have currently no real idea about our research findings, let alone take them into consideration. Why is this so? If I look for causes on our side, I can see two main problems:<sup>6</sup>

- We are not able to present our findings in a form that could be accepted by politicians or, in general, outside the community of educational science experts.
- The second cause might be our reluctance to communicate with politicians. It is a natural reflection of the overall situation in Czech society where the public opinion on politicians is very negative. I might not be wrong if

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<sup>4</sup> As for the particular thematic tasks, many suggestions are included in the OECD report *Review of evaluation and assessment in education – Czech Republic* (Santiago et al., 2012), especially those concerning the disputed issue of nationwide tests used for pupil evaluation.

<sup>5</sup> One of the few exceptions is the overview of educational research findings *Curriculum – teaching – school climate – teacher education* (Janík et al., 2009), which was commissioned by the Czech Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth.

<sup>6</sup> There are more causes of the problematic relationship between educational policy and educational research and they are present in many countries. Even though they have been identified and described in detail, they have not been dealt with successfully yet (Průcha, 1997).

I note that we – researchers in the field of education – usually do not see any use in wasting our energy and time on influencing policy makers in school education. If it is really so, a question arises: Should we keep the CERA aim to influence educational policy or should we give up on it? It is a matter for discussion when updating the CERA statute.<sup>7</sup> My opinion on this is as follows: *Our mission lies primarily in research work and (similar to other sciences) we should maintain the highest quality possible, regardless of the current interest or disinterest of politicians.*

What I consider to be a change possible to be realized in the future *is the extension of the research field*. This extension should proceed in several directions:

- Most of the research projects deal with primary and lower secondary education. Nevertheless, projects do not address what it is preceded and followed by. It is thus advisable to focus on the neglected field of *preprimary education*. It is undoubtedly as important for explanation of people's education as primary education is. I suppose that we should cast off the dismissive attitude to pre-school education, to subjects and processes of education in kindergartens as if they were not worth any serious research attention (comp. to quite a different situation abroad). I am pleased to say that the interest in research on pre-school education in the Czech Republic is on the rise – e.g. Syslová and Najvarová (2012) from the Faculty of Education in Brno took the first step by charting the research findings concerning preprimary education in the Czech Republic. Doctoral dissertations with empirical research on pre-school education in kindergartens are also being published (Bytešníková, 2007; Zajitzová, 2011).
- I see another opportunity to extend our research field in taking an interest in *vocational education*. We focus unilaterally on research of basic (i.e. primary and lower secondary) general education and we ignore the existence of vocational education, especially at upper secondary schools. But in fact, the Czech Republic belongs (according to data of Eurydice and others) amongst countries where about 90% of young population attend upper secondary education institutions. Nevertheless, there are

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<sup>7</sup> Significant opinions on this debatable issue are expressed in the monothematic issue of *Orbis scholae – Educational policy and research on educational needs* (3/2009, edited by K. Černý and M. Chvál).

hardly any research studies in the Czech context which would deal with educational issues at upper secondary vocational schools. We also do not draw on the interesting data concerning upper secondary and tertiary vocational education published by the National Institution of Technical and Vocational Education.

In my opinion, there is one more task that could be realized by CERA – *increasing the awareness* of Czech educational research among the general public. The situation is very unbalanced nowadays:

- On the one hand, researchers learn about various research projects and their findings from different publications in journals, books and the like. *Bulletin CERA*, published by The Institute for Research in School Education (Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno), has provided an overview of this kind of information for several years.
- On the other hand, there is the general public (especially teachers and parents). They are insufficiently informed about the research findings. We do not make any effort to produce *publications which popularize* educational science and its research findings. I think that we fall behind in these matters compared to, say, psychologists or sociologists, who publish many articles in newspapers and magazines, and also books adapted for a wider range of readers. It might be the case that we could influence the policy makers more through these efforts than when trying to communicate with them directly.

Let me conclude: I wish the Czech Educational Research Association a lot of success in continuing its useful activity in the following years. I wish to all of us that we take pride in its existence and value the fact that we can carry out our research work in unrestricted conditions. We should appreciate that conducting research, extending existing knowledge and establishing new theories is one of the most beautiful professions that one can have.

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