

“Sink or swim?” Equal educational opportunities for children from a different cultural background in the EU

Iva Stankova*, Department of Pedagogical Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlin, Stefanikova 5670, 760 01 Zlin, Czech Republic

Lenka Venterova, Department of Pedagogical Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlin, Stefanikova 5670, 760 01 Zlin, Czech Republic.

Suggested Citation:

Stankova, I. & Venterova, L. (2019). “Sink or swim?” Equal educational opportunities for children from a different cultural background in the EU. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*. [Online]. 6(7), pp 138-147. Available from: www.prosoc.eu

Received from; revised from; accepted from.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Jesus Garcia Laborda, Alcala University.

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Abstract

The joint education of children, pupils and students from a different cultural background within mainstream education is one of the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports’ priorities. Laws in force guarantee children’s right to so-called support measures, which help to overcome their disadvantages. In our research survey, our objective is to chart the improvement in conditions promoting equal opportunities in the education of children from a different cultural background. The primary documents analysed were legislative and curricular documents, programmes and projects at a national and European level. We have modelled the entire topic on the example of supporting children from a different cultural background; children of foreigners, or children with a different mother tongue who live in the Czech Republic, and on the example of supporting Czech children living in EU countries, visiting European schools which provide a multilingual and multicultural education.

Keywords: Pupils from a different cultural background, legislative documents, different mother tongue, European School.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Iva Stankova**, Department of Pedagogical Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlin, Stefanikova 5670, 760 01 Zlin , Czech Republic. *E-mail address:* istankova@utb.cz / Tel.: +420 724 486 209

1. Introduction

'It can happen that any child may need support at some time during their schooling.'

(Schola Europaea, 2019)

The right to education is one of our fundamental social rights, enshrined both in Czech law and in a number of international agreements. It includes the right to an obligatory and fee-free elementary education, access to education for everyone and equal access to educational institutions for everyone. The right to education should also be secured for children with special needs. This right is of fundamental importance for all citizens. The consequences of its non-observance, or a lack of the right, in some countries is devastating, for children in particular. It results in many negative impacts on their future life—in the form of illiteracy, and reduced or complete lack of prospects on the labour market, but we can also observe impacts throughout the whole of society—a growth in the black labour market and poverty, a low level of social security and limited access to healthcare and other related social problems.

According to Greger (2006, p. 21), the job of the education system in a democratic environment is firstly to secure high quality education, and secondly to secure the fair distribution of education to every member of society in line with their individual potential and capabilities. Thus, in the developed countries education policy sees the high quality and fair distribution of education, also described as fair access, as its most important objective. As Greger further notes (2006, p. 22), reflecting the fact that merely 'securing access to some education (meaning equality of access to education)' is not sufficient, since fairness and equal opportunities requires much more—'access to equal education, to education of comparable quality' (Greger, 2006, p. 22). It is, therefore, important to include equality of education conditions (so-called equality of treatment) within the concept of 'equal educational opportunities'. From the perspective of equality of educational conditions, one should take account of educational inequalities while preserving the conditions of equal treatment and equal care although the options for their utilisation are the responsibility of individuals.

Within the Czech Republic, a new education act, Act no. 561/2004 Coll., on pre-school, elementary, secondary, tertiary professional and other education, came into force on 1 January 2005 which deals directly with the education of foreigners. It grants the right to educational access to all outsiders equally under the same conditions as citizens of the Czech Republic. In general, education is based on the following principles:

- a) equal access of all citizens of the Czech Republic or nationals of any other European Union Member State to education without any discrimination based on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, belief or religion, nationality, ethnic or social origin, property, kith or kin, or the health condition or any other status of a citizen,
- b) considering the educational needs of an individual,
- c) mutual respect, deference, toleration of opinions, solidarity and dignity of all parties in education,
- d) free elementary and secondary education of citizens of the Czech Republic or nationals of any other European Union member state at schools established by the state, a region, a municipality or a union of municipalities,
- e) free dissemination of findings arising from the results of current knowledge of the world and in compliance with general goals of education,
- f) enhancement of the process of education on the basis of results achieved in the sciences, research and development and the widest possible application of effective up-to-date pedagogical approaches and methods,

- g) evaluation of results of education with regard to achieving goals of education laid down herein and in educational programmes,
- h) the opportunity given to everybody to learn for all their life whilst being aware of having co-responsibility for one's education.

[561/2004 Coll., Act on pre-school, elementary, secondary, tertiary professional and other education (the Education Act)]

Section 16 of this act states that children with special educational needs require particular support in education. Children, pupils and students with special educational needs is understood to refer to persons who need to be provided with support measures in order to achieve their educational potential or to apply or utilise their rights on an equal basis to others. Support measures means essential modifications to educational and school services corresponding to the health, cultural environment or other living conditions of the child, pupil or student. Children, pupils and students with special educational needs have the right to free provision of support measures by schools and educational facilities [561/2004 Coll, Act on pre-school, elementary, secondary, tertiary professional and other education (the Education Act)].

The act further expands the group of supported pupils and boosts the importance of school and educational facility support. It introduces the new term of pupils with different living conditions and from a different cultural background. These pupils include:

1. Pupils from different cultural background and living conditions
2. Pupils who come from an environment with a low cultural status, pupils in institutional care or pupils under protective care
3. Pupils whose mother tongue is not Czech

Pupils from different cultural backgrounds and living conditions includes pupils whose mother tongue is not Czech. These are pupils from the families of foreigners who reside in the Czech Republic on the basis of a residence right, or on the basis of a permit to do research. They also include pupils from families granted asylum, persons granted subsidiary protection, those applying for international protection and persons given temporary protection.

According to Slavikova-Boucher (2016, p. 4), admitting a pupil who comes from abroad and his or her full integration within the education process is a great challenge, and not a simple task. The difficulty of the task is further multiplied by the number of similar pupils within a single class. The school which a pupil attends is a place which has a fundamental impact not just on their inclusion within the educational system, but also their future integration within society. For foreign-language families in which parents also experience difficulties in learning the new language of the country they have moved to, a child who can speak this language through school attendance becomes an important and often unique mediator between the family and the majority society. Therefore, the successful and high quality inclusion of the pupil within the education system is the task of the teacher in whose class they are allocated, as well as the task of the entire pedagogical team. The process of admitting and integrating the pupil will differ depending on whether it is a pupil with a different mother tongue or in contrast a pupil, often a citizen of the Czech Republic, who speaks Czech, or who when living abroad was educated in line with the Czech curriculum. Proficiency in Czech is a key moment for the child (new pupil), the doorway to successful integration within society. For the pedagogical team and other school staff, admittance of a pupil with a different mother tongue and a different historical and cultural past is an opportunity to experience and work within a multicultural environment, learning to respond to such pupils appropriately and sensitively (Slavikova-Boucher, 2016, p. 4).

According to Slavikova-Boucher (2016, p. 5), we can differentiate pupils who come from abroad into:

- pupils who come from a foreign country and who have never come into contact with Czech
- pupils of whom one parent or grandparent is Czech (Czech origin)
- pupils who have visited a foreign language school abroad without additional systematic Czech teaching. They have only come into contact with Czech language marginally.
- pupils who have visited a foreign language school abroad and who have also learnt some Czech (Czech teaching without standardised outcomes)—usually pupils where a parent or grandparent is Czech (Czech origin)
- pupils who have visited a foreign language school abroad and who have also completed aptitude tests in a registered Czech school—mostly citizens of the Czech Republic born in the Czech Republic or abroad
- pupils who have visited a foreign language school abroad and a 'Czech School without Borders' type institution (where they also learn Czech Language and Literature, the Geography and History of the Czech Lands in accordance with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports' Framework Educational Programme)—mostly citizens of the Czech Republic born in the Czech Republic or abroad
- pupils who have visited the Czech Section in one of the European Schools—mostly citizens of the Czech Republic born in the Czech Republic or abroad

European Schools represent a unique international project of the European Union, and they are open to all pupils although they primarily serve the children of European Union employees, providing elementary and secondary education in two cycles. The European Schools need to take the language diversity of different countries into account, requiring a number of language sections available for pupils, within which the pupils can learn in their mother tongue regardless of which country they are currently living in. The size and number of different sections is determined by the size of the country and the number of its pupils. All European Schools provide education in English, French and German languages. A Czech Section can be found at European Schools in Brussels and Luxembourg.

2. Objectives/methods

The objective of the research was to analyse differences in support in the education of pupils from a different cultural background to the majority environment. In order to analyse documents, we utilised qualitative methods and a comparison of different documents. More specifically, we used analytical methods—a quantitative content analysis of documents—in order to find integration tools which the Czech Republic and European Union education and political system is endeavouring to utilise within the state and outside it. The primary documents analysed were legislative and curricular documents, programmes and projects at a national and European level. Our objective was to find what the opportunities and methods of support are available for pupils from a different living conditions background and from a different cultural background, children of foreigners or children with a different mother tongue who live in the Czech Republic, and also the opportunities and methods of support for Czech children living in EU countries visiting European Schools which provide a multilingual and multicultural education whose curricula are approved by the European Schools' Board of Governors on the basis of a detailed examination of the curricular documents of individual states within the European Union in order to secure the smoothest possible transferral of its pupils to national state schools.

Table 1. Documents analysed

European Schools	Czech Republic
Laws governing requirements for education within individual European Union countries at a national level. For teachers in Czech Sections, this involves the Education Act no. 82/2015 Coll, which amends Act no. 561/2004 on pre-school, elementary, secondary, tertiary professional and other education.	Education Act no. 82/2015 Coll, which amends Act no. 561/2004 Coll., on pre-school, elementary, secondary, tertiary professional and other education
United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)	Decree no. 27/2016 Coll. on the education of pupils with special educational needs and talented pupils, as amended by Decree no. 270/2017 Coll., Decree no. 416/2017 Coll. and Decree no. 244/2018 Coll.
Inclusive Education in the European Schools, 2018	Appendix 1 of Decree no. 27/2016 Coll.
Provision of Educational Support in the European Schools—Procedural document, 2012	
Evaluation Report on the Implementation of the Educational Support Policy in the European Schools, 2018	
Policy on the Provision of Educational Support in the European Schools, 2016	
Action Plan Educational Support and Inclusive Education, 2019	

3. Results

A. European Schools and their support measures

Since European Schools are a network of 13 intergovernmental schools primarily educating the children of European Union employees, the integration of children with disabilities was not a priority for them for a long time. On the basis of the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006 (and specifically Article 24), the countries of the European Union are required to secure inclusive education to pupils at all levels of compulsory education in such a manner so that they can acquire high quality, free elementary education comparable to pupils who do not need such support. A few years later, in 2015, the following recommendations and provisions in key areas (see the Report on 'Inclusive Education in the European Schools') of pupil support were implemented on the basis of long-term observation 3 years later:

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1. Support through human resources—qualified non-teaching staff work within individual schools to help secure pupils' integration at an individual level. Support co-ordinators and counsellors who are actively involved in supporting education are sent to European Schools by European Union member states. Psychologists, support teachers and other staff are citizens of the state in which the school is located.
 2. Qualified teachers—Teaching staff are sent to European Schools by European Union member states. As such, they must fulfil the teaching requirements of the country they come from. In the case of Czech teachers, they must meet the following:
 - requirements for performing a teaching staff role in accordance with § 3 of Act no. 563/2004 Coll. on pedagogical staff and on the amendment to some other acts (hereinafter the 'Act')
 - knowledge of English or French at least at B2 level (knowledge of both languages an advantage)
 - at least four years of teaching experience in similar roles in the Czech Republic
 - experience of an international environment an advantage.
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Table 2. Support measures within European Schools

3. Budgetary allocations;
 4. Accessibility—classes, canteen, relaxation zones also accessible for pupils with physical disabilities. Accessibility also relates to transport to school (e.g., school buses).
 5. Accessibility of information and option to communicate in the pupil's mother tongue, which may be different to the language of the country in which the school is located.
 6. Teaching material adapted to each pupil
 7. Individual pupil support (see differentiated instruction)
 8. Learning support securing smooth transition from preschool education to the elementary, and subsequently secondary education system.
 9. Curricula, tests and evaluations adapted to each pupil
 10. Smooth transferral to a different system of education (mainly applies to pupils coming to European Schools during the course of their schooling from a national state school, and vice-versa)
 11. Legal redress
 12. Monitoring/Quality Assurance/Evaluation
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3.1. Differentiated instruction

Differentiated instruction forms the basis of effective teaching. It focuses on supporting all pupils vertically across all the year groups and horizontally across pupils' needs. In planning and actual teaching, teachers must be aware of and take into account the individual needs of all pupils.

This includes:

- pupils with different learning styles
- pupils studying within a language section which is not their mother tongue
- talented pupils
- pupils with a mild learning difficulty
- pupils with diagnosed special educational needs

Pupils are offered three types of educational support, specifically General, Moderate and Intensive Support.

All forms of support must be progressive, based on satisfying the pupil's needs, which may differ over the course of schooling. Thus, support must be flexible. It is likely that the pupil will utilise a number of types of support at the same time.

3.2. General support

General Support applies to all pupils who have difficulties with a particular aspect in the taught subject, or who merely need extra tutoring due to long-term absence, change of school, or who are forced to study in a different language to their mother tongue. This support is provided to small groups and is short-term. Groups may be comprised of pupils from different language sections or different year groups. Planning support primarily involves setting objectives and criteria of success, which are then incorporated within the group educational plan.

3.3. Moderate support

This involves expanded General Support, designed for pupils with mild learning disorders requiring more targeted support. It is also suitable for pupils with a different mother tongue, or pupils who have problems concentrating, etc. This support is provided for a longer period than General Support. An individual educational plan is set up for every such pupil which incorporates specific goals which the pupil must achieve, and their subsequent assessment. This support is provided individually or to small groups of pupils with similar needs across the education system.

3.4. Intensive support

Intensive Support is separated into two levels, and is designed for pupils with special educational needs which are described in the document, 'Provision of Educational Support in the European Schools—Procedural document' (2018). At both levels, this support is provided with the objective of helping the pupil to develop the required competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes). It is provided within the class, or outside it to small groups of pupils with similar needs, or to individual pupils. All pupils who receive Intensive Support have an individual educational plan.

A. Support measures in the education of foreigners in the Czech Republic

The amended Education Act no. 82/2015 Coll., amending Act no. 561/2004 Coll. on pre-school, elementary, secondary, tertiary professional and other education, alongside Decree 27/2016 Coll. on the education of pupils with special educational needs and talented pupils are the key legislative documents relating to the support measures system for children with a different mother tongue. In general, these documents specify support on the basis of the following provisions:

Table 3. General support within the Czech school system

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1. Citizens of the European Union and their family members have access to:
 - elementary education including institutional education and protective education
 - meals that are provided at schools, school clubs organised by a school facility in order to further develop pupils' hobbies and interests with regular day school attendance if they are elementary school pupils, and corresponding to the year of secondary school or conservatory grade
 - secondary education and tertiary professional education, including institutional education and protective education
 - pre-school education, elementary art education, language education and school services
 2. Persons who are not citizens of the Czech Republic and who have had previous education abroad shall be, at their request when taking admission examinations at secondary and tertiary professional schools, waived the admission examination of the Czech language which is a part of the admission examination. The school shall verify knowledge of the Czech language which is necessary for education in the chosen field of education by means of an interview.

3. Pupils are provided with:
 - free of charge preparation for their inclusion in elementary education involving learning the Czech language, adapted to the needs of the pupils
 - if possible and in co-operation with the country of origin of pupils, support in the teaching of their mother tongue and the culture of their country of origin, which shall be co-ordinated alongside standard education at elementary school
 4. The Regional Authority shall secure the preparation of teaching staff who shall carry out this education.
 5. The Ministry shall lay down in an implementing legal provision the form, content and organisation of the free-of-charge preparation.
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The educational support for children, pupils and students from a different cultural background, which the group of pupils described above belong to, is provided through so-called support measures. These are defined in the Education Act as amended by Act no. 82/2015. The act implements a system of five levels of support measures which are specified in Appendix 1 of Decree 27/2016 Coll. The first three levels of support measures apply to pupils who are foreigners and who have a different mother tongue and pupils from a different social and cultural background. These support measures involve necessary modifications in education and school services corresponding to the health, cultural background or other living conditions of the child, pupil or student. Children, pupils and students with special educational needs are entitled to the provision of support measures free of charge by schools and educational institutions (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, Decree 27/2016 Coll.). These measures involve:

Table 4. Support measures for pupils from a different cultural background in the Czech Republic

1. counselling assistance from the school and school counselling facilities,
 2. modification of the organisation, content assessment, forms and methods of education and school services, including securing the teaching of special teaching care subjects and including extending the length of secondary or tertiary professional education by up to two years,
 3. modification of the terms and conditions for admittance to education and completing education,
 4. modification of the expected outcomes of education within the limits determined in the framework educational programmes and accredited educational programmes,
 5. education according to an individual educational plan,
 6. use of a teaching assistant,
 7. use of other teaching staff.
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According to the paragraph, these support measures are further divided up into five levels according to organisational, teaching and financial demands. Support measures of different types or levels can be combined together.

3.5. First level of support measures

The first level of support measures is set by the school, such that the recommendation of a school counselling facility is not required, and the measures do not have standardised financial demands. This is designed for pupils with advanced knowledge of Czech who do, however, require support mainly in individual subjects and to compensate for mild difficulties requiring slight modifications in the school teaching and homework regime. The teaching support plan is usually set up by the class teacher and school counsellor, or other School counselling facility worker in collaboration with all the teachers who teach the particular pupil. All teachers are informed of the teaching support plan, and the pupil's parents bear these in mind. The plan is assessed after 3 months, and if it is demonstrated that it is working, it continues to be carried out.

3.6. Second level of support measures

The second level of support measures is provided to pupils with an insufficient knowledge of the teaching language on the basis of a recommendation of a schools counselling facility. This level may involve the modification of the organisation and method of teaching, pupil assessment and possible use of an individual study plan. Pupils should be entitled to 3 hours of Czech per week, at most 120 hours each year at elementary and secondary schools, modification of the content of education and special textbooks. At this level, the measures do not generally involve modification of the expected outputs. The second level also proposes support for social and cultural adaptation. The assessment is based on ascertaining pupil specifics, e.g., lack of knowledge of the teaching language, and sets up assessment criteria which allow the pupil to achieve personal progress—e.g., formative assessment. At this second level, intervention includes support measures involving securing the special educational care subject and securing educational intervention.

3.7. Third level of support measures

The third level of support measures is provided to children with no knowledge of the teaching language, which may require modifications in the methods of work, organisation and course of education, modification of the school educational programme and of pupil assessment. Pupils are, for example, entitled to 3 hours per week of Czech lessons, at most 200 hours at elementary and secondary school, modification of the content of education, special textbooks and aids, and also, for example, a teaching assistant.

4. Conclusion

The joint education of children, pupils and students within the educational mainstream is one of the priorities of the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, and naturally also all other states of the European Union. The amended Education Act guarantees children's right to so-called support measures as of 1 September 2016. These measures help overcome their disadvantage—a culturally different background. In practice, methods of critical thinking are often used with children from a different cultural background, in particular those with a different mother tongue. These include reading workshops and thought maps and activities connected to specific acts—baking Christmas treats, visiting libraries, topical walks. It is also typical to use aids which facilitate education and learning, such as Czech for Foreigners textbooks, 'prvouka' (elementary studies) textbooks, Czech textbooks for lower years, picture dictionaries, encyclopaedias, fiction books tailored to the child's age and language ability, games of pairs, other games, maps, photographs, everyday objects related to the particular topic and interactive teaching programmes, etc. The most common methods and forms of work are: special (shorter and modified) versions of quarterly projects, spelling issues in testing—oral justification, option of revision, extra exercises instead of certain dictations, shorter dictations, option of working with teaching summaries / tables including in tests, providing extra time to do tasks, necessity of using a bilingual dictionary / picture dictionary / own list of vocabulary, tolerance of errors depending on subject tested, short essays to do at home with preparation, more frequent use of visual aids – working with maps and timelines, pictures, practising reading with comprehension, practicing pace, praise for partial successes and positive motivation. A lot of individual care needs to be focused on foreign pupils during lessons in which Czech is a barrier; special preparation needs to be set up in line with the individual educational programme which needs to be set up for every disadvantaged pupil. Another obstacle in the education of children from a different cultural background is the different culture itself, in which they have grown up, which is theirs and which can often differ significantly from Czech cultural awareness. Such specific obstacles may include, for example: different yardsticks, values, discrepancies in cultural awareness, a different system of education (different method of teaching, relation to teachers, demands on pupils, rules and habits of

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school life), relativity of the value of historic events, different approaches to understanding history, etc.

As the extent of the system of support and assistance for children from a different cultural background and for children with a different mother tongue suggests, the issue of integration and inclusion within the school environment is a fundamental one for the pupil and his or her future life in society, but it is highly demanding both for teachers and for the pupils themselves. This is shown in Human Rights Watch research undertaken within European Schools.

Acknowledgements

This article was based on the grant project IGA SV60171706020 / 2110—The concept of educational values from the perspective of pupils from different cultural backgrounds (Tomas Bata University in Zlín, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Pedagogical Sciences, Zlín, Czech Republic). However, any mistakes that remain are our own.

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