

## Czech Republic

### Auspices

Early education in the Czech Republic is almost entirely a public service. Kindergartens (*mateřská škola*) are part of the educational system, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. Regional and municipal education authorities have increasing responsibilities, however, and centres enjoy a great deal of autonomy. Financing is drawn from multiple sources – the regional school authority (teachers' salaries, books and equipment), municipalities (running costs and capital investments) and from parental fees, while funds to improve material conditions or purchase equipment and toys are often generated through sponsoring contracts with private enterprises. Some private and church kindergartens are now in operation, though on a very small scale.

In practice, there is no longer an organised day-care system for children from 0-3 years. Only 67 crèches have survived from the previous regime, administered by the Ministry of Health. Former crèche buildings have been sold or allocated to other purposes.

### Developments

Since the “velvet revolution” of 1989, the Czech Republic has renewed its links with its long tradition of early childhood education. There has been an impressive increase in diversification and pedagogical freedom. The understanding of education as conformity to accepted knowledge and social norms is giving way to a spirit of enquiry and innovation. There is a fresh appreciation of the child as a subject of rights, reflected both in the desire to lessen the pressures placed on children in pre-school institutions, and to integrate children with special needs. Pedagogical approaches and methods of work more suited to the young child's needs and mentality have been encouraged, and daily routines in kindergartens have been relaxed. Greater emphasis is placed on free play and creative expression. Innovative experiments with age-integrated classes are also current.

Decentralisation is taking place, and great efforts have been made to change the relationships between the education partners. Outreach to parents as equal partners has improved immeasurably, and men have been invited into the previously female world of kindergarten teaching (Army duty may be replaced by service as assistants in kindergartens and other institutions, bringing a young male presence – and alternative role models – to young children).

Work on the preparation of a framework curriculum for the kindergarten has begun. The new curriculum will orient kindergartens to offer systematic and appropriate programmes to young children, yet remain open enough to allow innovation and experimentation. The content of education will be worked out in five spheres: biological, psychological, interpersonal, socio-cultural and environmental. General competencies (personal, cognitive and operational) that children should acquire in the kindergarten will be set, linked with the behaviours and knowledge expected in the first cycle of primary school.

### Context

*Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP:* 0.5% (the Czech background report provides a figure of 1.16% for all ECEC).

*Labour force rates:* in 1999, 70.1% of women aged 25-34 years participated in the labour market. 13.3% worked part-time.

*Parental leave:* universal paid maternity leave of 28 weeks (69% of earnings) with a flat-rate, parental leave of four years, taken almost exclusively by mothers.

*Attention to children with special educational needs before they enter compulsory school:* a) *Children with disabilities:* there is growing inclusion of children with disabilities, though many special kindergartens and schools still exist, even for children with relatively light handicaps; b) *Children from low-income families:* the child poverty level is 5.9% after redistribution, and specific and means-tested benefits are available to families with young children; c) *Ethnic and bilingual children:* problems of poverty, social exclusion and education under-achievement are most acute among the Roma. Other ethnic groups, e.g. Polish, German, generally organise education in their own language. The settled Roma community constitutes 0.7% of the population, but according to estimates, numbers may rise to 2% of population if migrant Roma are included. High rates of unemployment are recorded among the group and levels of education are low compared to Czechs, 84% of whom complete upper secondary education. Since 1993, the government has invested in several pilot projects for Roma children, and preparatory classes for socially or culturally disadvantaged children of 6-7 years, whose entry into compulsory school had been delayed.

### Provision

In early education, 3-6 years, the system is almost entirely public. It is now decentralised, with a great deal of autonomy given to each centre. Helped by falling fertility rates, sufficient numbers of places are available. Parental fees are capped at 30% of costs, and are reduced or waived for families in need. There are special supports for low-income/ethnic areas and families. Despite this, families considered to be most in need are least likely to enrol their children in pre-school settings.

*0-3 years:* children in this age group are cared almost exclusively by mothers and/or by informal caregivers.

*3-6 years:* 66.5% of children enter public fee-paying, full-day pre-school at 3 years, reaching 98% at 5-6 years. The average coverage rate for children aged 3-6 years is 86%. Children whose parents are on leave have right of access to the kindergarten for 3 days every month. Kindergartens remain open eight or more hours per day.

*Child-staff ratios:* child-staff ratios are 12:1, but classes will often have up to 25 children, looked after by more than one teacher for, at least, part of the day.

### Staffing and training

More than 95% of teachers in the *mateřská škola* have completed four years of training (15 to 19 years) in one of the 18 training or secondary pedagogical schools in the country. Particular emphasis is placed on skills in art, music and sports, areas that traditionally have been deemed important for Czech pre-schools. All graduates are female, but increasingly fewer of them actually enter the profession. Wages are low, only 76% of a primary teacher's salary, which itself is 103% of the national average wage. Further accreditation through in-service courses has not yet been organised.

### OECD policy issues

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD Review team for the Czech Republic were:

*An informed public discussion of gender issues and policy for children under 3:* given the drastic shift in policy in recent years, it seems timely to bring together different stakeholder groups, including parents, to engage in a broad public discussion about the needs of very young children, women, and parents in modern Czech society. It seems that if this issue is not carefully addressed, the Czech Republic might face a critical shortage of ECEC provision for the coming generation of parents and children, with potential effects on women's access to the labour force and on birth rates.

*Improving access to kindergartens, especially for children and families in need of special support:* despite marked improvements in outreach to parents and families, socially or culturally weak groups still have serious difficulties in trusting the municipal kindergartens or entering into close relationships with kindergarten staff. As a result, children from these groups are underrepresented in kindergartens. The practice found in preparatory classes of employing bridge staff from the Romany community might be extended to the kindergartens as a promising initiative to welcome Romany children and parents into educational settings. In-service training for teachers to work with low-income and ethnic minority families also needs to be strengthened. In addition, co-ordination between local and national authorities governing health, social services and education is particularly important to serve children and families in need of special support in a comprehensive and holistic manner.

*Addressing work conditions and the initial and in-service training of staff:* an important area for policy attention concerns the recruitment and retention of staff, e.g. the ageing of present staff, and the reluctance of many young women who have completed pre-school teacher training to embark upon kindergarten teaching as a career. There is a need to improve the wages, but also the low status of the profession. Another challenge concerns the lack of men working in

the profession. Some of these workforce issues may be addressed by shifting initial training to the tertiary level, although care should be taken to preserve the focus on practical skills that is a strong part of the current training. If training requirements for new staff are raised, mechanisms need also to be identified to upgrade the training of teachers who are already working in the field. There also seems to be a need for additional in-service training to work with parents in order to foster stronger co-operation between kindergartens and the home.

*The need for more national research:* in the light of future social and economic trends, more national research on the needs of families and children in the Czech Republic is needed to provide policy makers with reliable information. It also will be important to identify present data gaps and future needs of the early childhood field and to support ongoing data collection on public and private ECEC settings. The Ministry of Education may wish to consider building up the early childhood research capacity by financing the development of a national framework to support research and evaluation in the field.