

KEY TRENDS IN CHANGES TO PRIMARY EDUCATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AFTER THE 1989 VELVET REVOLUTION

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Abstract/Izvešček

The aim of the review study is to reflect on key trends in the process of transformation of primary education in the Czech Republic after the 1989 Velvet Revolution. The major milestones in the transformation process in terms of education policy are reflected upon. The core of the study is an analysis of the changes to primary education in the reality of school practice, including the most significant innovative approaches. The study concludes with an evaluation of the development of Czech primary education in the context of international trends and with reflection on the prospects for its further development.

Keywords:
primary education,
transformation,
education policy

Ključni trendi sprememb v osnovnošolskem izobraževanju na Češkem po "žametni revoluciji" leta 1989

V pregledni študiji razmišljamo o ključnih trendih v procesu preoblikovanja osnovnega šolstva na Češkem po "žametni revoluciji" leta 1989. Osredinjamo se na glavne mejnike procesa preobrazbe z vidika izobraževalne politike. Jedro študije predstavlja analiza sprememb v osnovnošolskem izobraževanju v šolski praksi, vključno z najpomembnejšimi inovativnimi pristopi. Študijo sklenemo z oceno razvoja češkega osnovnošolskega izobraževanja v kontekstu mednarodnih smernic in z razmislekom o možnostih nadaljnjega razvoja.

Ključne besede:
Osnovnošolstvo,
transformacija,
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Introduction

The aim of this review study is to reflect on the main directions of the transformation of primary education in the Czech Republic after the 1989 Velvet Revolution in the broader context of social and political changes since then and from an international perspective. The reform processes will be presented in terms of (1) education policy, (2) the theoretical background and key concepts, and (3) practical attempts to transform primary education in the reality of school practice. The guiding methodological principle is an analytical-synthetic approach that takes into account an interdisciplinary view of the issues under consideration.

The context of education policy

Major political and social changes in the Czech Republic have necessitated fundamental changes in many areas. Intensive efforts to transform the education system have been observed since the early 1990s (Spilková, 1997; Walterová, 2004). During the 1990s, several basic approaches were promoted in the form of divergent starting points for transformation (Kotásek, 2004).

Immediately after the political changes of November 1989, a line of negation of the past and restoration of the “status quo ante” became prominent. This meant rejecting the state of education that existed at that time and trying to eliminate the shortcomings in education caused by the Communist regime between 1948 and 1989, combined with a return to the historically proven experience of the interwar period, when Czech education was among the best in the world. This line of negation of the existing state was based on a relatively robust critique of school education in terms of its overall concept (insufficient consideration of the pupil’s personality, needs, and abilities and the conditions for learning) and goals (a one-sided emphasis on knowledge and rote learning), content (oversized curriculum content, defined in detail and binding in the syllabus), and teaching processes (the dominance of frontal teaching and verbal methods and insufficient support for intrinsic motivation to learn and building a safe social climate in the classroom).

Another stream of opinion is the preservation of the status quo, which in contrast, considered Czech education to be essentially good, high-quality, and not requiring fundamental change, but rather partial changes that had the character of adaptation to new conditions. There was a liberalising current that placed the emphasis on the demonopolisation of education as the main tool for change.

In the first half of the 1990s, the role of conceptual starting points for the transformation of education was significantly underestimated. Even though there was no education policy with a clearly formulated vision of the future direction of Czech education that was consensually adopted across political parties, a number of relatively radical interventions were implemented in the education system: the restoration of eight-year grammar schools and a selective system, curricular changes, etc.

Since the second half of the 1990s, an approach has prevailed that goes beyond both the position of mere negation of the past and the restoration of the status quo ante and also the position of preserving the status quo. The basic starting points in designing the transformation of education involve analysis of the key trends in the development of the education systems in developed countries, a critical assessment of the situation in the Czech Republic, and a prognostic view of the future of Czech education.

The culmination of this development was the creation of the National Programme for the Development of Education, known as the White Paper (2001), which represented a fundamental turning point in the transformation process. For the first time in ten years of predominantly spontaneous and non-conceptual development, the need for fundamental systemic change based on a change in the paradigm of education was officially declared at the governmental level.

Following the White Paper, the Framework Programme for Basic Education (2004) was conceived during the years 2001-2004; in this, the requirements of the state were specified by defining the basic framework in the form of goals, content, and expected results, which became the starting point for creating the school's own educational programme. The two-level concept of the curriculum was a significant change in Czech education. It is necessary to emphasise that in the context of the development of Czech education before 1989, these two key documents represented a fundamental change, a "Copernican" turn in the overall paradigm of school education.

Other post-Communist countries in Central Europe (Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary) also underwent similar developments in the approaches taken by education policy to the transformation of education (Kosová and Porubský, 2011).

The theoretical background to and guiding principles for the transformation of primary education

The idea of the humanisation of education became the key principle in the transformation of Czech education after 1989, in terms of “a humanising programme of school reform” or humanisation “as a crystallising axis of transformational changes” (Helus, 2003; Kotásek, 2004; Spilková et al., 2005). In this sense, the reform changes in the 1990s followed the progressive tradition of Czechoslovak education between the wars.

The focus on the humanisation of the school represents a significant strengthening of the anthropological orientation, understood as a “turn to the child”, involving increased attention to his/her needs, interests, and opportunities for holistic personal development. In the context of the development of Czech education before 1989, the emphasis on the child and his/her personal development was indeed a relatively radical turn in the meaning of school education.

Unlike other levels of education, the idea of humanisation was adopted across the professional community as a key starting point for the desired changes in primary education and primary schools. The concept of primary education as child-oriented and as emphasising personal development became a shared guiding concept – child-centred primary education, personal development primary education (Lukášová, 2003; Helus, 2003; Spilková, 1997).

This basic principle – the turn to the child – has a fundamental influence on the teacher’s approach to the child and on the changes in communication and interaction at primary school. The quality of the teacher-pupil relationship is crucial in primary education, as the teacher is an important reference person for the child at this age, a “key person in childhood”.

A quality social and emotional classroom climate is an influential factor in the socialisation of pupils, which is an important developmental task at this age. The importance of a safe environment with a predominance of positive emotions is related to the close connection between cognitive and affective aspects of learning, which has been highlighted by several authors on the basis of their research results (Brown 1971; Stuchlíková, 2002). The support of positive emotions in learning processes has a formative significance for many other qualities of the child’s personality.

Another significant characteristic of the personally developing concept of primary education is the change in the hierarchy of educational goals. The dominant goal orientation towards the holistic development of the pupil's personality is an appeal to a balanced focus on knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values with regard to the intentions of Delors' four pillars, or four key goals of education - learning to know, learning to act, learning to live with others, learning to be – to which the school should pay equal attention (Delors, 1996; Stará and Starý, 2019).

When the content of teaching is being designed, the goal is not quantity, but quality, i.e. the selection of a meaningful curriculum. For anthropologically-oriented primary education, an integrative approach to the content and the creation of broader educational units, and topics enabling the interconnection of knowledge are important. Supported by psychological background (children's syncretism and the integrity of cognition, which are typical up to about nine years of age), emphasis is placed on creating a holistic picture of the world with an indication of the basic context, in contrast to overwhelming children with isolated and partial knowledge about the world.

For the content of primary education, it is essential to connect the curriculum with the real world and with life situations that the child understands and is close to (Bertrand, 1998). These approaches support the personalization of learning, making it meaningful for the learner, which is important for the development of children's intrinsic motivation.

A constructivist, or rather social constructivist approach to cognition and learning corresponds to these approaches to the goals and content of primary education. Discovering and constructing knowledge on the basis of one's own activities, experience(s), and personal interpretations of the world are of fundamental importance. An important feature of the constructivist concept is respect for what is termed the close experience of the pupil, i.e. based on what pupils really know, what they have ideas about, and their experiences.

One of the key principles is an emphasis on cooperative learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1994), which appreciates the potential that lies in the use of cooperative relationships between pupils to improve the learning of each of them. The method used to assess pupils plays an important role in the personally developing concept of primary education. Rather than quantitative, summative evaluation, a qualitative, formative, and individualised approach is preferred (Boyle and Charles, 2014; William, 2011).

In the Czech context, a significant shift in the current concept of assessment is an emphasis on the openness of assessment to development, i.e. the continuous provision of feedback on the course of learning, assessment that is focused on the processes of learning (and not only on its results). Individualisation of assessment that takes into account the individual conditions and potential of pupils and is in relation to their own previous performances is also a significant change, since in Czech pedagogy there is a deeply-rooted tradition of evaluation based on the comparison of pupils with each other.

So much then, for the declared guiding principles of the transformation of primary education. However, the new paradigm is also the subject of criticism in the professional community (Dvořák, 2010; Štech, 2016). It is mainly a matter of the degree of emphasis on the anthropological orientation of primary education and concern that the turn to the child not be exaggerated and not mean a return to sentimental idealization of the child and submission to children's needs, and the logic of natural and spontaneous development. It is also a matter of whether the call for fundamental change in the relationship between teacher and pupil does not mean abandoning the leadership role of the teacher, and whether the emphasis on the non-cognitive functions of primary education does not imply a retreat from the cognitive goals of the school, etc.

Changes in primary education in the reality of school practice

From the intentions of educational policy, conceptual starting points, and theoretical principles, we now turn to real processes in the transformation of primary education. We will focus on the most important phenomena in the transformation of primary education in terms of external and internal reform.

External reform

From the point of view of external reform, the overall context, the type of education system, and the interconnection of primary education (institutional, curricular) with the previous and following levels of education are important. In the first half of the 1990s, as part of the approach to education policy – the restoration of the status quo ante – the tradition of eight-year grammar schools was renewed, and with it a selective education system.

This meant a less favourable context for the basic functions, concepts, and goals of primary education in terms of its completion, a certain closedness of this cycle of education, and increased pressure on performance as a criterion of subsequent external differentiation.

Initially, the introduction of a selective system was perceived by most of the parental public and a significant number of politicians, especially right-wing ones, as a positive phenomenon in the process of overcoming the legacy of socialist schools. A significant role was played by the way the unified ‘basic school’ (compulsory education) was implemented in the socialist era in terms of its uniformity and underestimation of individual differences between pupils and the need for internal differentiation. Czech experts warned of the risks, and foreign experts warned against a mechanical return to early external differentiation of pupils (OECD Reviews of National Policies for Education Czech Republic, 1996). In the Czech context, however, this controversial issue remains until today more of an ideological and political problem than an eternal professional topic.

At the very beginning of the 1990s, there were reflections on a closer connection between levels of education that had hitherto been separated: pre-school and primary. The inspiration came from various forms of functional interconnection in developed European countries, either in the form of structural integration (the integration of pre-school classes into primary education, as in the Netherlands or England, or connecting pre-school, preparatory classes “Vorklassen” to primary schools, as in Germany, Belgium, or Luxembourg), or through continuity in the curricula of both educational institutions (as in France and some German federal states) (Spilková, 1997).

The organisational and curricular interconnection of these educational levels in the Czech Republic was experimentally verified at several dozen schools. From the educational policy side, the issue of linking pre-school and primary education has not been systematically addressed and remains in the competence of the founders and management of schools.

The extension of primary education from four to five years was a significant change (this began from the 1996/97 school year onwards on the basis of the 1995 amendment to the Act on the System of Primary, Secondary, and Higher Vocational Schools). The lengthening of primary school attendance was unreservedly seen positively as a return to tradition.

Attendance at what is called “basic school“ (primary and lower secondary education) was extended from eight years to nine (five at the first level - primary education, while the second level - lower secondary education - remained four years; the age at which children started school remained the same, at six years old). Pupils complete their nine years of compulsory schooling either at basic school (the first and second level) or after the first level of basic school in the first years of “gymnázium“ (eight years secondary grammar school - lower and upper secondary education) .

In terms of the overall concept of primary education, it is important to address the issue of the integration or exclusion of pupils with various types of disadvantages. Until 1989, there was a distinct tendency to segregate this group of pupils into specialised schools and facilities. During the 1990s, a clear trend towards the integration of these pupils can be observed in the practice of primary schools. However, for a long time the state did not provide schools with the necessary support and conditions; everything was based on the goodwill and determination of the school management and the dedication of individual teachers. It was not until 2016 that the concept of inclusive education was enshrined in legislation and widely implemented in mainstream education (Tomková and Hejlová, 2018; Štech, 2021). The first years of efforts to put inclusive education into practice in schools show what a great change it is for schools. This means that schools, principals, teachers, parents, and pupils must understand this change, prepare to manage it, and then try to implement it. A key role in this process at the school level is played by the principal, who must be able to communicate the need for change in a leadership role, communicating openly not only the benefits but also the challenges that the change will bring (Pivarč, 2020). He or she must be able to attract teachers and other stakeholders and create the conditions for integration (cultivating the school culture, motivation, targeted teacher training, etc.).

Research data confirms that teachers themselves have a decisive influence on the quality of the implementation of inclusive education at the classroom level (Tomková and Hejlová, 2018). The basic prerequisite is their conviction of the correctness and meaningfulness of this idea, value, and attitude. Something that is fundamental to this set of prerequisites and conditions for the successful implementation of inclusive education is the acceptance of diversity and its potential as an enrichment and opportunity for growth and learning for all pupils (Tomková and Hejlová, 2018; Pivarč, 2020).

An attitudinal-value dimension with a strong influence is the understanding of the main task of the teacher's pedagogical work as achieving the educational maximum of each child.

Equally important, however, are the knowledge and skills related to the didactic transformation of the curriculum, teaching methods, and forms of organization, and more general obstacles that may arise in learning. Knowledge and understanding of the possible obstacles are the basis for the didactic transformation of the content of a different nature. Experience from the first years of implementation has also shown the importance as a factor in the successful implementation of inclusive education of the quality of cooperation with other actors – in particular teaching assistants, special educators, school psychologists, and parents (Štech, 2021).

Promoting quality inclusive education on a wider scale is an important task for the years to come. To manage teaching in a heterogeneous classroom teachers need a range of new professional competencies that they currently lack and in which they have not been trained. The wider context – the attitudes of politicians, parents, and the wider public to this fundamental change – is also important. Attitudes towards the concept of inclusion in education are still quite heated (Štech, 2021). The long tradition and high level of special education and the traditional high level of selectivity within the Czech education system have undoubtedly influenced the attitudes of both professionals and the public.

Internal, bottom-up reform

Since the beginning of the 1990s, it has also been possible to observe a significant current which has seen the focus of reform changes in what is known as internal reform, or bottom-up reform. Some teachers have shown a strong desire for change, enthusiasm, and a high degree of involvement in the changes. A significant source of inspiration in this spontaneous activity is the reform pedagogy movement (developing worldwide since the beginning of the 20th century) (Štech, 1992; Rýdl, 1992). In the Czech context, there has been a renaissance of ideas which were strongly suppressed for more than forty years in connection with the onset of Communist power and its ideology. These were, in particular, an anthropological orientation of primary education, understood as a “turn to the child”, emphasis on support for the holistic development of the child’s personality, consideration for individuals educational needs, an emphasis on respectful communication with pupils

and care for a safe climate in the classroom, and activity-based and experiential teaching methods.

In terms of internal reforms in education, the most significant changes are taking place in primary education. Many teachers at this level of education identified with the key principles of the transformation and tried to implement these in their teaching. These teachers were very active in various newly formed professional associations; they shared their experiences with innovative activities, published, and organised educational events in order to inspire and recruit more teachers for change.

One of the first areas in which innovative teachers gained strength was the content of the curriculum (Spilková, 1997). They launched their own attempts to alleviate the oversized nature of the curriculum, its complexity, the amount of theoretical knowledge, etc. They created methodological materials, wrote textbooks, and participated in the creation of educational programmes. Another area in which there have been important changes over time is that of teaching/learning processes. The strengthening of respect for the individuality of pupils, their needs, preconditions for learning and opportunities for development, etc., represents a significant change. The quality of communication between teachers and pupils is changing significantly, as is the effort to cultivate social communication between pupils. The care of teachers for a quality social and emotional climate in the classroom is also related to this. Research data (most of it concerning pupils in the fourth and fifth grades of primary school) has already proved the positive perception of the classroom climate by pupils at the turn of the century (Linková, 2001). It is also possible to observe the efforts made by teachers to restore the disturbed trust between schools and parents and to seek new forms of quality communication and cooperation (Rabušicová and Pol, 1996).

There have also been significant changes in methods and learning strategies. These involve concern a strengthening of the emphasis on activity, empirical, and experiential methods. The importance of play in teaching as a full-fledged method of learning in this age group is being rehabilitated. Many teachers are moving from the hitherto dominant frontal mode of teaching to a more significant use of individual work and cooperative learning.

Since the early 1990s, teachers have put a great deal of effort into changing pupil assessment. Many of them have abandoned classification and grading and replaced these with verbal assessment of pupils, initially in what is called the experimental

mode. Initially, teachers faced significant problems with the reserved attitude of the parental public (teachers had to obtain the written consent of parents to verbal assessment), with some pupils who missed marks as their motivation to learn, with their own inexperience and unpreparedness for the new way of assessment, etc. At present, the way in which pupils are assessed is the responsibility of schools; it is part of the School Educational Programme. In the field of primary education, it is common for schools to have several forms of assessment functioning side by side in one class – grading, verbal assessment, or a combination of both.

We conclude our presentation of key efforts in the area of the transformation of primary education by reflecting on the alternative concepts and innovative projects that have had the most significant inspirational potential and influence on teachers. From among the alternative pedagogical approaches based on original philosophical and psychological starting points, Steiner/Waldorf education and the pedagogy of Maria Montessori have prevailed most significantly in the Czech environment. In the first half of the 1990s, they had a significant influence on the cultivation of pedagogical thinking and practical reform efforts (Rýdl, 1992).

Some advocates of alternative approaches aspired to a broad scope in the process of public schools transformation and, later with the expansion of other innovative programmes, focused inward on improving existing schools and the creation of new schools mostly within private schools. Out of a total of 4238 primary schools in the Czech Republic, there are currently 20 Waldorf primary schools, and the principles of Montessori pedagogy are applied in more than thirty primary schools (these schools are mostly private; sometimes their founder is the city council).

Innovative projects and programmes of a complex nature, which do not have such a distinct pedagogical concept based on specific philosophical and psychological starting points, have had a much greater influence on the transformation of primary education within the public school system. The international programmes Step by Step, Reading and Writing to Critical Thinking, and Health Promoting School are among the most widespread. Other concepts that have provided inspiration for changes in primary education include Drama in Education and Integrated Thematic Instruction (Kovalik, 1993). In the last 15 years, the Feuerstein instrumental enrichment intervention programme, which focuses on targeted cognitive development and remediation of cognitive deficits, has also gained significant traction (Feuerstein, Rand, Hoffman, and Miller, 1980).

Conclusions, prospects for the further development of primary education

A look at the transformation of primary education in the Czech Republic over the past thirty years shows that there have been significant changes. A new concept of humanistic and anthropologically-oriented primary education has been introduced in terms of its basic features.

In some respects, this was such a fundamental reversal of the developments before 1989 that it is still at subject of discussion among experts and the general public as part of considerations about prospects for the further development of primary education. The focus of attention is on the question of the polarity between a school of performance (achievement orientation) versus one focusing on personal development. From the 1950s to the beginning of the 1990s, a performance-oriented concept of primary education prevailed in this country. Performance in terms of the norm and comparisons was absolutized and individual preconditions for performance were not sufficiently taken into account. However, in the last thirty years, there has been a significant shift towards a personal development approach. Currently, the turnover rate is again being discussed. At the national level, the success of primary education reform in the spirit of a humanistic, child-centred approach is not being systematically monitored. Data from international surveys – PISA, PIRLS, and TIMSS – provides relevant sources for such reflection. In these, Czech pupils perform slightly above the EU average. Their performance in all the PISA and PIRLS domains has remained relatively stable over the last 20 years, with a gradual increase. A detailed look at the evolution of the TIMSS results shows that between 2007 and 2019, there was a statistically significant improvement among Czech primary school pupils in mathematics and science (https://www.csicr.cz/html/2-020/Narodni_zprava_TIMSS_2019/resources/_pdfs_/TIMSS_2019_Narodni_zprava.pdf).

In many European countries, it has also been possible (since the 1970s) to observe a shift from a school of performance to a primary school oriented towards personal development. There have been differences of extent between countries (Hayes, 2010). For example, in the Nordic countries, comparing pupils performance is considered undesirable, and the emphasis is on stimulating individual pupil progress in relation to their individual preconditions. As early as the mid-1990s, research-based findings were published showing that the concept of performance is a minority issue at the primary school level in Europe (Scheerens and Brummelhuis,

1996). Examples of good educational practice were summarised in research on the functioning of primary schools in the countries of the European Union. The key characteristic is considered that of personal development, i.e., a focus on achieving the personal maximum in the development of each student.

It should be added to the stated polarity of performance versus personal development education that although it is commonly used in the professional literature, it is rare in school practice in the form of such sharply formulated contradictions. It is not a matter of incompatible opposites; it is more about finding a balance, finding the optimal level in the emphasis on various aspects of education (Alexander, 2001).

Following the argumentation based on educational-psychological concepts, let us now turn our attention to the influence of the socio-cultural context on the conception of the meaning and goals of (inter alia) primary education. Social and civilisational conditions, the circumstances of children's lives, and the expectations and demands placed on them are changing significantly. Changes are taking place in the structure of the family, its lifestyle, and methods of family upbringing. The characteristics of the child population are changing; for example, the ubiquitous digital technologies are blurring the distinction between the virtual and the real world in children's perception, and the overload of stimuli and information is promoting superficiality in their perception and, thinking and inattention. Increased sensitivity, less resistance to stress, and a certain psychological fragility can be observed in many children. This raises an increasing need for psychosocial support for pupils and an emphasis on nurturing mental (cognitive, emotional, and social), physical, and spiritual (meaning, values and ethical principles) wellbeing at school. Furthermore, the long period of distance education resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic clearly demonstrated the importance of mental healthcare and the importance of socialising children and cultivating social relationships, as well as meeting emotional needs (CSI, 2020).

The experience of the global coronavirus pandemic and, the emphasis on the optics of the future in targeting education to equip the young generation to meet the challenges of life in the 21st century have sharpened some traditional issues and highlighted new perspectives. In times of rapid and unexpected change, uncertainty, and new demands for acceptance and coping in the personal, social, and professional spheres, the importance of overall human resilience and mental health is increasing substantially. Regarding school education, this means an increased emphasis on soft

skills, essential skills, which include a range of key skills and competences such as understanding oneself, recognising and managing one's own emotions, resolving conflict situations, communicating with respect for others, negotiating, compromising, listening, collaborating, organising learning and work, managing time effectively, taking responsibility for oneself and one's own learning, motivating oneself to achieve goals, not giving up when things go wrong, and resisting manipulation through the development of critical thinking.

It is a challenge for primary education (*inter alia*) to respond appropriately to this changing socio-cultural context of children's lives. In addition, under the influence of social conditions and the circumstances of childhood, children understandably change significantly. In terms of the sociological concept of the sequence of generations, current primary school pupils belong to the alpha generation, which includes children born after 2010, i.e., in the world of digital technology (Thomson and Laing, 2003). They are termed 'digital natives' and spend much of their free time in virtual reality at the expense of real social contacts, are influenced by social networks and various influencers, regularly watch YouTube, etc. As a result, some of the traditional constants of childhood and personality characteristics of children – their perception, thinking, experiencing, social relationships, etc. – and how they learn (e.g., learning from virtual situations) are changing significantly. Research data shows that today's children lack primary experiences, are becoming alienated from nature, and are developing new phenomena such as a fear of animals (Jančaříková et al., 2020).

Considering the changing social context and the focus of education from a future perspective, Fullan (2021) emphasises a paradigm shift in education. He describes the new human paradigm as a comprehensive model based on four driving forces – wellbeing and learning, social intelligence, investment in equity, and systemicity (wholeness). He considers the development of six global competences – character, citizenship, cooperation, communication, creativity, and critical thinking – to be the new meaning and key goal of education. The development of academic knowledge and skills and socio-emotional qualities of personality are part of the set of these competences. The guiding principles of the new paradigm are to become the starting point for changing the education curriculum (Fullan, 2020; Fullan and Quinn, 2016). Conceptual work is currently under way in the Czech Republic on curriculum changes for primary and secondary schools, which are associated with sometimes heated discussions among the professional and broader public about the nature and

extent of curriculum changes. Issues relating to changing the overall paradigm of education are at the centre of attention. In the case of primary education, the possibilities and limits of the above-mentioned approaches – materiocentric versus anthropocentric, performance versus personality and personal developmental education – are being reconsidered in new contexts with a view to finding a balance in the degree of emphasis on different educational goals and areas of the development in children's personality.

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