

EXPANDING THE RIVERBED OF MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

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Janák, D. et al. (2015). *Rozšířit řečiště hlavního vzdělávacího proudu: sociální inkluze žáků a transformace vzdělávacího systému v Krnově a v Sokolově. [Expanding the Riverbed of Mainstream Education: Social Inclusion of Pupils and the Transformation of the Educational System in Krnov and Sokolov]*. Opava: Silesian University, Faculty of Public Policies.

The collective monograph certainly summons interest at first glance with the unconventionally chosen format in which it is issued. It may be perceived as unpleasant for reading by some, but this certainly should not be a factor to determine whether or not the monographs should be read. The first impression also needs to be informed that the monograph is supplemented by photographs of the renowned photographer Jindřich Štreit. From the overall first impression, it is not clear whether this was the intention of the authors or not, but due to its graphic design and black and white finishing, the publication has a gloomy feel to it (which cannot be perceived only in the negative connotation). While the form and design of the monograph form an integral part of it, the most determining is clearly its contents.

As the name suggests, the authors focus on two selected cities (see the title of the monograph) and on presenting the research data findings. The monograph means to: "describe the results of the transformation of educational systems in two cities (Krnov, Sokolov) with the support of a sufficient amount of data on the process and results of this transformation. We attempt to offer a case study that would describe and evaluate the changes, and compare their progress and results in both of these cities. At the same time we try not only to describe the effectuated changes, but also to identify examples of good practice which could inspire other municipalities who want to, or will rather be forced to implement similar changes in their local education system, and to highlight the problematic issues which it is advisable to prepare for." (p. 12) However, the authors add: "Although the goal of our study is to describe the results of the transformation of the educational systems of only two Czech cities, the results of our research bear relevance for the whole society and witness to the situation in the Czech society as a whole." (p. 11)

Although the above stated aim of the publication is courageous in some respects, we cannot assert that it would be unrealistic, or unfulfilled. However, there will always be a sufficient number of arguments, particularly methodological, which will rather stand against the intentions of the authors. The authors divided the monograph into 7 chapters, including the introduction and conclusion, and a number of other sub-chapters which especially towards the end give a splintering impression with an impact on the text.

In the second chapter¹ entitled Social Disadvantage, Social Exclusion and Ethnicity in the Context of Education – Conceptual and Methodological Basis of the Research, the authors demonstrate that this is definitely not the first time they have encountered the topical field of social disadvantage and social exclusion. Nevertheless, some of the authors' interpretations are disputable, e.g. "The educational process can be imagined as a spiral movement, to whose middle or edge we come according to the socio-economic position of the pupil's family, whose impact has the pupil either maintain (reproduce), lower, or enhance the (extra-scholastic) social inequality." (p. 23) Overall, the second chapter cannot be but considered as otherwise well arranged, linguistically comfortable and providing the theoretical basis of the research.

Chapter three, Historical and Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Both Cities and Their Education Systems, starts in a somewhat redundant historical digression, meaning that some of the information on the history of the two cities may be considered as too detailed and having little connection to the subject area of the publication's interest (e.g. information from the Middle Ages). However, the authors quite rightly describe the less remote history which is in an explicitly described and perceived way connected to the issues at hand. The ensuing sub-chapters and information are necessary not only for the authors, but above all for the reader. The presented information on both cities is clear and comprehensible.

Chapter four, Transformation of School Network in Krnov and Sokolov does not bring mere descriptive account of the situation, but the authors already offer a more analytical look at the situation with selected examples of conducted interviews which complement the text in an appropriate fashion. The validity of the data and of the interpretive authorial commentary is highlighted by the fact that, quite rightly, the authors interviewed all "types" of players involved in the above transformation.

Chapters five and six named Transformation of the Education System in Krnov and Sokolov in Light of a Questionnaire Survey Among Primary School Teachers and School Systems Through the Optics of the Parties of Education form, in my opinion, the most valuable part of the book, which, however, follows from the logic and conception of the monograph. The authors present the found data, quantitative and qualitative, in a reader-friendly format; in particular the quantitative portion of the research is palatable even to individuals who are not used to navigating complex statistical calculations. Although some results are predictable, a selective choice of only some parts of the research would be ineffective. Overall, the results are processed on a premium level, which is not always the rule.

The conclusion of the monograph, which is designated as chapter seven, provides summary information on the detected results, which, after all, is to be expected in the conclusion. Appropriately, the authors discuss the more general findings, best practices, etc. However, in tab. no. 7.1 (p. 130), which describes the risks and possible solutions for transformational changes, the authors could be more specific in the proposed measures. This way, they remain on the general plane. Given the nature of the text, the whole book is understandable to a broader spectrum of readers, some specification would be much more beneficial.

The greatest shortage of the present monograph is the fact that in certain passages, the authors are guilty of inconsistency, even inaccuracies in pedagogical terminology and generally, of the lack of

¹ The first chapter forms an introduction to the whole book.

deeper links with the area of pedagogy and its codified disciplines. This is reflected, among others, in the bibliography. Nevertheless, I believe that a more detailed implementation of the pedagogical aspects would be beneficial.

The above mentioned complaints can be seen as marginal. The information presented is interesting to say the least, and exploitable primarily in the local conditions. Like the authors, I believe that their usefulness is wider. Concluding their conclusion, the authors state: "Differentiation and selection of pupils is a relatively good solution from the point of view of pedagogical work. Teaching in heterogeneous groups is in fact very difficult. This poses a challenge not only to practice, but also for pedagogical research and for pedagogy as a discipline. In our opinion, it is appropriate already during the preparation of pedagogues at pedagogical faculties to take into account the wider social and cultural circumstances of the educational process, reaching beyond the realm of the pedagogical-psychological diagnosis and didactics. Personal experience (e.g. introduction to the living conditions of minorities) and openness is hardly replaceable by educational seminars, or any precisely established methodology. It is our contention that in the current reflection on education, the social dimension of education in its non-trivial form is often neglected. Social disadvantage is a "handicap" of a different kind than the handicaps of health or psychological state of the individual. In addition, sociological thinking points out the breadth of the overlooked aspects and unintended consequences rather than providing clear methodological and diagnostic tools." (p. 132)

Personally, I consider this as one of the most important suggestions for the pedagogical practice.

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