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A comparative analysis of quality of holistic education for pre-primary and primary education in Europe: A comparative review

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Abstract

The present study tries to compare the quality of holistic education for Pre-primary and Primary Education in Europe in terms of four indicators on the quality of school education are selected in this study. These indicators include Education Systems (Schooling System, Home Education, Curriculum, and Education Expenditure per Student), Resources and Structures (Education and Training of Teachers, and Participation in Pre-primary Education), Monitoring of School Education (Evaluation and Parent Participation), as well as Attainment (Reading, Science, Mathematics, and ICT). It needs to be noted that this study explains the educational context in Europe and Czech in each indicator. According to European Commission (2000), the selection criteria of these indicators is by the working committee of national experts give a full series of information, which draws a picture of quality in European schools. Based on the commission reports, the presentation of these indicators help countries to look outwards rather than inwards in order to examine their performance in comparison with other countries. Besides, Europe includes a mixture of different cultures and histories, form a union, have common problems and follow many common goals. Based on reports of OECD (2019), systematically comparing education indicators across countries give information regarding the state of education to policy makers, educators, students, parents and the public.

Keywords: quality in education, pre-primary education, primary education, holistic education

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1. Introduction

Education is considered as an extremely influential instrument for social changes and alteration (Vijayalakshmi, Phil, & Phil, 2019). Holistic approach has a powerful basis in the educational context (Rose, 2005). A holistic approach helps education because this approach makes each learner able to increase their own abilities and talents at individually appropriate time and speed, support learners' development and achievements, foster their curiosity, and encourage their personal and cultural feeling (Badjanova & Ilisko, 2015). Holistic education is a theory in holistic approach which includes some features such as completeness, interconnectedness and interaction (Miller, 2012). Holistic education is an eclectic and inclusive movement, which emerged in the mid-1980s as a response to the then-dominant worldview of mainstream education. It is an educational paradigm that integrates the idealistic ideas of humanistic education with spiritual and philosophical ideas, incorporating principles of spirituality, wholeness, and interconnectedness along with those of freedom, autonomy, and democracy.

Holistic education theorists assume an integration of spirituality and humanistic ideals, a combination that most progressive and democratic movements in education have attempted to keep separate. The present study tries to compare Quality of Holistic Education for Pre-primary and Primary Education in Europe in terms of four indicators on the quality of school education are selected in this study. These indicators include Education Systems (Schooling System, Home Education, Curriculum, and Education Expenditure per Student), Resources and Structures (Education and Training of Teachers, and Participation in Pre-primary Education), Monitoring of School Education (Evaluation and Parent Participation), as well as Attainment (Reading, Science, Mathematics, and ICT). It needs to be noted that this study explains the educational context in Europe and Czech in each indicator. According to European Commission (2000), the selection criteria of these indicators is by the working committee of national experts give a full series of information, which draws a picture of quality in European schools. Based on the commission reports, the presentation of these indicators help countries to look outwards rather than inwards in order to examine their performance in comparison with other countries. Besides, Europe includes a mixture of different cultures and histories, form a union, have common problems and follow many common goals. Based on reports of OECD (2019), systematically comparing education indicators across countries give information regarding the state of education to policy makers, educators, students, parents and the public.

2. Four Indicators on the Quality of School Education

2.1 Education Systems

Schooling Systems - The European education system is decentralized and includes the following levels: The first level of education which mainly organized to make children familiar with school environment is pre-primary education. Pre-primary education programs are center or school-based and organized to provide the educational and developmental requirements of three years old children. At the pre-primary level, children begin to learn basic literacy and numeracy skills (OECD, 2002). The second stage is primary education. Children usually start this level at ages 5, 6 or 7 and the duration of this level is 4 to 6 years. Previous formal education is not a prerequisite for organizing programs at the primary education. Children usually start systematic studies such as reading, writing and mathematics at the primary level (OECD, 2002). The third level of education corresponds to lower secondary education. It usually follows the fundamental programs of the primary level and teaching is generally more topic-based. Teachers at the lower secondary education level are more specialized and

teach in their particular field of study (OECD, 2002). Lower secondary education lasts for 2 to 6 years and is divided into two branches including terminal and preparatory which prepare students for working life and upper secondary education, respectively.

Like some European countries such as Austria, Denmark, Finland, Hungary and Sweden, the lower secondary education level in the Czech Republic is combined with primary education to create single-structure or elementary level (OECD, 2002). In most European countries, upper secondary education constitutes the last level of secondary education. The age range of individuals is 15 or 16. At this level, education is often more systematized and subject-based than lower secondary education level as well as teachers must be more qualified and higher level than lower secondary education level (OECD, 2002). Compulsory education or training in most European education system corresponds to a full-time period. It begins at the primary level and ends at 15 or 16 year-old. The duration of compulsory education is 9 to 10 years. It needs to be noted that the notion of compulsory education is different from compulsory school attendance (European Commission, 2018).

In the Czech Republic education system, Since the 2016/17 school year, students of the second level of the basic school can attain the compulsory education in the form of the individual tuition or home education without usual attendance at school. It is reported that the head of school allows home education when the student is accepted for compulsory education on the basis of a written application (European Commission, 2018). The highly decentralized education system in the Czech Republic can be explained as follows: The duration of school in Czech is nine years. Children must attend school at the age of six and begin the compulsory education. The basic education in Czech covers compulsory school education such as primary and lower secondary education. The school system includes three major stages: first stage of basic education, second stage of basic education, and secondary education (OECD, 2016). Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): Pre-primary education (mateřské školy or Kindergarten) usually starts at the age of three and lasts for three years.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs is responsible for childcare institutions. It is reported that early childhood education and care is presently compulsory for young children of 5-year-olds (OECD, 2020). First stage of basic education (primary education): The first stage of basic education which corresponds to primary education covers the first five years of compulsory education (school years 1 to 5-normally from ages 6 to 10) (OECD, 2016). Second stage of basic education (lower secondary education): Following the first stage of basic education or primary education, children must complete the second stage of basic education which is equivalent to lower secondary education. This stage lasts for four years (school years 6 to 9-typically from ages 11 to 14) (OECD, 2016). Secondary education (non-compulsory education: upper secondary education): Secondary education is non-compulsory which is called upper secondary education and includes various educational curricula. Young individuals, who complete secondary education, obtain a qualification equals to upper secondary qualification. The duration of this stage is for two years and normally starts from the age of 15, and in various school types such as practical schools, vocational secondary schools, and technical secondary schools (OECD, 2016).

In the Czech Republic education system, the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports is for monitoring the state, conception and development of the education system as well as for providing financial resources from the state budget. It is worth noting that the Ministry also starts the general content of pre-primary to secondary education. The responsibility of the 14 regions is for education on their territory which covers pre-primary to tertiary professional level. They are also responsible for providing financial resources to schools. It is reported that the regions are school founders for upper secondary schools, conservatoires and tertiary professional schools. The regions also help communities create nursery schools and elementary schools (Vladimíra, 2018). In addition, a large number of municipalities consists of 6000 municipalities are responsible for organizing and providing pre-school and basic education (OECD, 2020). Based on the above explanations, the structure of the educational system in the Czech Republic is rather similar to other European countries except some slight differences exist in the age range, the duration of each education level and the responsibilities.

Home Education - Home education is allowed in primary and lower secondary education levels in many European countries. If parents request home education, it is allowed in 28 European educational systems. It is reported that in six countries including all communities of Belgium, Bulgaria, Ireland, Austria, Switzerland and Liechtenstein, parents need to request the authorization to top level authorities, while in other 14 countries including most of the Nordic and Baltic countries, parents directly request to local authorities or schools (European Commission, 2018). Based on the final reports, in those countries where home education is allowed, parents are free to teach their children themselves or to choose an instructor. In three countries such as France, Denmark, and United Kingdom, parents have complete independence to choose their children's educator. In other countries where home education is allowed, the educators do not require to have the qualifications' level. Conversely, the educator must have an adequate teaching training or qualification in three countries such as Slovakia, Switzerland and Liechtenstein or a minimum level of education is required in three countries such as Czech Republic, Italy and Norway (European Commission, 2018).

In contrast with other countries where home education is allowed, in the Czech Republic education system, the educator of the first level of the basic school must have at least an upper secondary education level qualification and the educator of the second level of the basic school must have at least a bachelor qualification (European Commission, 2018). Besides, it is worth nothing that in all countries where home education is allowed, the development of students is controlled and assessed, except the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In eight countries such as Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Italy, Hungary, Austria, Norway and Montenegro, the assessment procedure is organized in different forms each year or even more often. In the Czech Republic education system, students take an examination every semester in order to indicate the achievement level of the pertinent educational contents. Specific schools determine the form of the examination or verification of the achievement level (European Commission, 2018).

Curriculum - The curriculum varies greatly in each European country. The curriculum in the Czech Republic education system depends on the education level: First stage of basic education (primary education): the curriculum of this stage includes nine subjects such as Czech language and literature, introduction to acquiring knowledge, the principals of geography and geology, the principals of natural sciences, mathematics, physical education, musical education, work education, and drawing, painting and sculpture (NCEE, 2006). Second stage of basic education (lower secondary education): the curriculum of this stage (6 to 9 years) in the Czech Republic education system consists of foreign language, civic education, history, biology, physics, and chemistry, as well as optional subjects including a second foreign language, computer science, or technical education (NCEE, 2006).

Educational Expenditure per Student - In European countries, differences in salary levels can mainly account for differences in expenditure. There are also other factors for example the number of students enrolled and the different duration of studies which have an important effect on the amount of educational expenditure per student. Differences in the levels of prosperity in countries such as Denmark and Austria can also influence the differences between countries. In addition, expenditure per student enhances corresponding to the age of students (European Commission, 2000). Based on the reports, there are significant differences in educational expenditure between individual countries. For instance, among the European countries, Greece has quite low levels of expenditure, while Austria shows above average expenditure (European Commission, 2000). In an international comparison, general spending on education has been low in Czech Republic. Since expenditure on education did not match growth in national wealth, the spending on primary education level reduced by 16 percentage points. In addition, annual per-student educational expenditure in Czech Republic was below average at primary level. However, a decline in the student population resulted in an increase in per-student expenditure at primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary level in a period of time (OECD, 2020). The public sources provide the greater part of educational expenditure. The accountability of the central and regional governments is to allocate funding to primary and secondary schools in the Czech Republic (OECD, 2020).

2.2 Resources and Structures

Two indicators fall into this area. These indicators are 'education and training of teachers' and 'participation rates in pre-primary education'. Each included important features which emphasize school performance and student success (European Commission, 2000).

Education and Training of Teachers - Educational systems in European countries indicate a vital need for high-quality initial training. Good introduction of initial training and ongoing professional progress support the high-quality initial training. Opportunities for greater international mobility are enhancing, putting at a top those skills and experiences which facilitate teachers functioning in very different cultural and historical situations (European Commission, 2000). In some countries, only training for teachers in Gymnasium (Germany) or AHS (Austria) (allgemeine hohere Schule) are required (European Commission, 2000). Based on the reports, the spending time on pedagogic and practical training of teachers varies to a great extent. This variety ranged from less than a year in countries such as Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovenia to almost four years in Germany (European Commission, 2000). Education and Training of Teachers in the Czech Republic benefit from high levels of qualification, certification and participation in professional development programs (OECD, 2020). In the Czech Republic education system, the educator of the first level of the basic school must have at least an upper secondary education level qualification and the educator of the second level of the basic school must have at least a bachelor qualification (European Commission, 2018). It is reported that the results of 2018 examinations indicate that students in the Czech Republic consider their teachers to be less supportive and helpful, and the classroom behavior to be less helpful to learning than other European countries. Besides, real teaching and learning in the Czech Republic was above other countries. In 2018, usual teaching time at both primary and lower secondary level was 617 hours in comparison with other European countries (OECD, 2020).

Participation in Pre-Primary Education - Pre-primary education corresponds to the initial level of planned teaching. This level of education is normally center- or school based and trained staffs provide the educational and developmental requirements of three-year-old children. Although the importance of the pre-primary education is accepted all around Europe, the ideas regarding its educational function are different. For example, some ideas are based on the fact that pre-school education helps children to transit to primary school, while others believe that this level of education is devoted to children to only play. It is reported that the participation rates in pre-primary education have enhanced in almost all European countries during the last decades (European Commission, 2000). It is worth noting that compulsory primary education starts earlier in some countries than in others. Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Hungary and Sweden suggest children three full years of pre-primary education. In some countries such as Austria, Germany and the Netherlands, the pre-primary education lasts for two to three years. In some other countries including Finland, Greece and Portugal, the duration of the pre-primary level is two years. In the United Kingdom, primary education starts at very early age which implies that fewer pre-primary places are needed for children (European Commission, 2000). In the Czech Republic, pre-primary education (mateřské školy or Kindergarten) usually begins when children are three-year-old and lasts for three years. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MPSV) is responsible for this level of education. The Czech Republic tries to enhance the rates of enrolments and EU funds support the institutions of pre-primary. It needs to be noted that ECEC is compulsory for children at 5 years at present. Based on the reports, although the enrolment rates for children at 3 to 5 years old enhanced between 2010 and 2017, the enrolment rates of children under three-year-old were below average of other European countries (OECD, 2020).

2.3 Monitoring of School Education

This category includes two indicators including 'evaluation' and 'parent participation'. In this respect, heads of schools, teachers, students and parents play an important role and participation in school improvement (European Commission, 2000).

Evaluation - All educational systems need evaluation and assessment. Evaluation deals with several

objectives at national, local and school level. Evaluation can take two forms including internal/external, or a combination of the two. These forms include resource and education concepts. Taking this into consideration, majority of European countries are trying to find the greatest and the most useful combination of the two forms of evaluation (European Commission, 2000). In some countries including all the Scandinavian countries, the results of examinations are published in general. In France, schools administer tests yearly for diagnostic objectives and examination results provide benchmarks for schools in order to compare their own performance and increase standards. In Spain, according to the sample of schools, the results are published to present information on standards in general. In Scotland, results of external examinations are published at 16 to 18. The attainment test scores are utilized both diagnostically and for purposes pertinent to national standards (European Commission, 2000).

In the Czech Republic education system, both external examinations and teacher assessments assess students' learning (OECD, 2020). The principle instruments for education system evaluation in the Czech Republic include total student results from international assessments in conjunction with school-leaving examinations, standardized tests in grades five and nine, and sampled tests in primary education. It is reported that both central and regional governments publish yearly reports on the development of the education system (OECD, 2020). The Czech Republic is seeking to reinforce its education's evaluation and assessment system through administering standardized national examinations, tests and sampled assessments to give system-level data on student learning results. The Czech Republic is also trying to develop a national education monitoring system with the focus on improvement of school evaluation and classroom-based student assessment. It is reported that external school evaluations are perceived the main liability mechanism within the education system. The Czech School Inspectorate (ČŠI) must evaluate each school every six years. In addition, it is necessary that schools perform internal self-evaluations and determine their conditions, structure and content. Subsequently, schools are also required to publish annual activity reports (OECD, 2020). Based on the reports comparing with other European countries, in the Czech Republic, teacher appraisal can also reinforce professionalism and performance if it constitutes both improvement and career development factors. It is worth noting that teacher appraisal may occur in a high share of Czech schools (OECD, 2020). In addition, strong student assessment practices can report and form effective plans for educational improvement (OECD, 2020).

Parent Participation - In European countries, parent participation in their children's education has some policy results. Parents strongly demand and feel about their children's schools and educations. They are important consumers in the field of school education. It needs to be noted that parents can support school management and teachers, thereby help to school improvement, or they can prevent progress and create conflict. At both national and local level, parent participation may affect the quality of children's education in several ways In this regard, parent participation may include 'legal consultative and decision-making bodies such as school boards', 'evaluation of their schools', 'voluntary or parent associations', 'voluntary participation in after-school activities', 'voluntary participation in classroom activities for example paired reading', 'communications with the school and supporting their children's learning and development' (European Commission, 2000). In the Czech Republic education system, parents play an important role in daily school life and children's educational progression (Rabusicová, & Emmerová, 2002).

According to the Family Act in the Czech Republic, the Act puts a crucial emphasis on the role of parents and their participation in children's education: 'Crucial role in the education of children is that of parents' (Act no. 94/1963 of the Code of Laws, on family, article 32, paragraph 1). This fact is indicated in the School Act as well: 'The legal representative of the child, foster-parent, citizen or an institution, that a child was consign to by a judicial verdict, is obliged to enroll a child at the school age in school and take care that the child goes to school regularly and on time; they are also obliged to make a declaration to the child's application for secondary-school studies. If they enroll the child in a club for after- school activities, they are obliged to take care that the child goes there regularly and on time (Act no. 29/1984 of the Code of Laws, on the system of primary, secondary and higher vocational schools [the School Act], in the form of subsequent laws, article 36)' as cited in Rabusicová, and Emmerová, (p. 484, 2002).

The Czech schools have the commitment to work with parents to increase the children's progression and intensify the common educational impact of the family and the schools. Parents must also work with the schools when their child cannot attend the school due to illness, or in case their child is very talented, or parents distrust the fairness of classification (Ordinance no. 219/1991, on primary school, article 4, paragraph 2, paragraph 3, article 11, paragraph 3) (Rabusicová, & Emmerová, 2002). It is worth noting that parent participations in the educational contexts in the Czech Republic indicate that the school needs parents to make decisions on their children. However, the Czech Republic does not provide the contextual situations for the creation and progression of the parent participation with the school (Rabusicová, & Emmerová, 2002).

2.4 Attainment

This category of attainment includes four indicators. These indicators are considered as crucial objectives for the future for all European countries including the Czech Republic. The areas are 'Reading', 'Mathematics', 'Science', and 'ICT' (European Commission, 2000).

Reading - Based on the reports of 2018, students in the Czech Republic functioned similarly in reading comparing with other students of European countries. It needs to be noted that girls performed better than boys in reading. The Czech Republic's students also achieved high educational attainment and obtained scores above average in literacy skill. Socio-economic situation is one of the most important factors influencing the reading performance of students in the Czech Republic (OECD, 2020).

Mathematics - It is reported that the performance of students in mathematics in central European countries for example Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia was particularly well (European Commission, 2000). An examination of seventh and eighth grade students to deal with mathematical questions in a number of European countries including the Czech Republic indicated a variety of results. In the Czech Republic, the results showed that the students performed above average in mathematics in 2018 (OECD, 2020).

Science - Based on the reports of 2018, the results of science scores indicated that there are significant differences between European countries and the Czech Republic. It is reported that the Czech Republic (eighth grade) achieved the highest scores, while Cyprus (eighth grade) had the lowest outcomes. There are some contributing factors which had the largest impacts on these results such as gender (boys outperformed girls in all European countries in fourth grade) in Austria, Hungary, Netherlands and the Czech Republic, as well as other variables for example motivation, position of scientific studies and jobs, and methodological practices are related to the obtained results (European Commission, 2000). In the Czech Republic, the results showed that the students performed above average in science in 2018 (OECD, 2020).

ICT (Information and Communication Technology) - Nowadays, technology has a crucial role in education particularly with the appearance of World-Wide Web and internet (Rahman Hakim & Kodriyah, 2015). The degree of combination of technology in-class is directly correlated with the teacher's enthusiasm to use the technology in their lessons (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2017). Using technologies to play game helps students to apply their conceptual knowledge. That is why previous researches have indicated that using technologies in the education process can increase students' learning interests (Ebner & Holzinger, 2007). In addition, using technology in teaching creates different sorts of stimuli included in activity oriented learning. Learning material is more interesting using technology and technology also increases media literacy of students and teachers (Naga Subramani, & Iyappan, 2018). Digitalization increasingly affects all aspects of life. It is interesting to note that digital devices and digital technologies are more common and extensive in the field of education. Using technologies, many data is being produced and it can be utilized to understand, improve and individualize learning and increase other areas of education (OECD, 2019).

Technology is also altering the classroom experience as well. ICT (Information and Communication Technology) has made many innovations and improvements in teaching. ICT has also made an extreme change in the old pattern of teaching and learning. It is reported that student's role is more important than teachers in the

new pattern of learning (Vijayalakshmi, Phil, & Phil, 2019). Teachers' insights regarding ICT can affect to limit or increase the application of technology in primary education. It is reported that the primary school teachers should be well-informed about the educational goals of the ICT tools. They can apply specific technologies in particular lessons so that the teachers are able to support important combination (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2020).

All European countries emphasize the crucial role of new technologies. ICT has the largest impacts on the structure of human societies, the way of learning, living, working, and expressing (European Commission, 2000). Different European countries perceive ICT from various aspects. For example, in the eastern European countries, ICT is perceived a separate subject. In Norway, Sweden and Ireland, ICT is a tool to utilize in the curriculum. In contrast, in central European countries (including Iceland, Finland and Latvia), ICT is both a subject and a tool. However, in some other countries such as Portugal, Cyprus and Italy, ICT is not formally taught (European Commission, 2000). In the Czech Republic, some national strategies provide measures for training ICT in schools, e-learning, digital/media literacy and e-skills progression. It is reported that ICT is taught in the Czech education system as a separate subject in both primary and secondary schools, and within technology as a subject. In contrast, ICT is also taught as a general tool for other subjects/or as a tool for particular activities in other subjects in secondary schools. ICT is used in Mathematics and the Arts as well as in natural sciences and social sciences in class in primary and secondary schools. Based on the reports, the Czech system does not support to apply ICT in student assessment. In the Czech Republic, a variety of computers such as desktop, laptop or tablet are available for students to use at all grades and this is near to the EU average at all grades except grade 11. Besides, in the Czech Republic, teachers utilize ICT in lessons near to the EU average at all grades (European Schoolnet, 2012).

3. Conclusion

The present study aims to explore the holistic approach to pre-primary and primary education in Europe and Czech Republic. The holistic approach emphasizes the wholeness, interrelatedness, and interaction between contents. To this end, four indicators on the quality of school education were selected in this study to show that these indicators are interrelated to improve students' performance and achievement. These indicators include Education Systems (Schooling System, Home Education, Curriculum, and Education Expenditure per Student), Resources and Structures (Education and Training of Teachers, and Participation in Pre-primary Education), Monitoring of School Education (Evaluation and Parent Participation), as well as Attainment (Reading, Science, Mathematics, and ICT). It needs to be noted that each indicator includes information about the educational context in Europe and Czech. Therefore, the present study showed that European countries including the Czech Republic have various views concerning the presentation of these indicators on the quality of school education. In addition, using the afore-mentioned information of these indicators, European countries can look outwards in order to explore students' performance and achievement in comparison with their counterparts. The results of this study are also useful for policy makers, educators, students, parents and the public.

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