



# Social Studies in Primary Education: Comparing the Slovak and Czech Republics

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**Abstract:** *This article focuses on Slovak primary school (ISCED1) subjects that represent social and human knowledge and contrasts the Slovak situation with the Czech one. First, it looks briefly at the historical context that gave rise to and continues to shape these subjects. It then considers their content and attempts to explain why these subjects have ceased to evolve. It also shows that, despite the continual re-discovery of teaching methods and the acute need for them when teaching pupils of this age, there has been little research in this area. It concludes by stating that the lack of education research and discussion makes it difficult to influence public policymaking and curricular reform.*

**Keywords:** *Slovak primary social studies, curriculum of social studies, didactics, teaching methods of social studies*

## INTRODUCTION

Exploring social realities is just as much part of school education as science and art. Although this type of learning content may seem difficult for primary pupils, and therefore inappropriate, the very basics of social science are covered at the primary level. History, geography, economics, and law are less commonly taught as separate subjects at the primary level; however, it is much more usual to find one or two subjects that incorporate some of the basics of social science and the humanities. Many of the concepts and terms used in these fields are, of course, highly abstract and unfamiliar to pupils at this level, but that does

not mean it is not worth making the effort. There are, after all, various ways of introducing this type of content. They do, however, require the teacher to be familiar with them and to know how to use them in the classroom.

In this paper, the focus is on *People and Society*, one of the primary-level education areas currently taught as two separate subjects in Slovakia. Those two subjects are local studies and knowledge and understanding of the world. Both are taught in the first and second years of the four-year lower primary level (ISCED 1) in the Slovak Republic. They were established in a specific era and cultural tradition, and one can question the desirability and, indeed,



sustainability of this traditional format. The current era is one of great social and economic change and these changes have prompted didactic innovations. Hence *People and Society* should reflect these contextual changes – to some degree at least. Inspiration as to how some of these trends can be incorporated into classroom teaching is to be found in Czechia. Drawing on the Czech example is a legitimate approach: the two countries have many decades of shared historical experience, including in education, and the language barrier is minimal.

So how should and could one change the content and methods used in *People and Society* to make this a more up-to-date and relevant area of human knowledge? This paper addresses this question by comparing the Slovak curriculum with its historically and geographically similar counterpart, the Czech curriculum, which differs in covering both richer content and a wider spectrum of social and human knowledge.

The second area in which change is both possible and desirable is didactics, including teaching methods. Repeated analyses of Czech settings have revealed numerous effective and productive methods for teaching the key concepts of social studies to primary pupils, and these may provide inspiration. The approaches this paper draws upon are based on experiments described in scientific and specialist articles, and which have been incorporated into school textbooks in a highly practical format.

## CONTEXT

It all began with the *trivium*. At different times, in different cultures and in different countries and empires, the introduction of compulsory basic education focused on reading, writing, and arithmetic. Over time, and to varying degrees and for different reasons, other school subjects began jostling for a place, including ones aimed at teaching pupils about the real world around them. This applied to social science and the humanities, although frequently they were not considered subjects within their own right, and that was doubly true in primary education.

This was the case in Slovakia as well. For almost a thousand years, what is now the Slovak Republic was part of an empire – first the Hungarian Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Which is why, when we are retrospectively interpreting our educational heritage, both the economic and political context are important. The Czech Republic was largely influenced by Austrian thinking, which meant that in Czech primary schools, social studies and humanities were taught as a single separate subject from 1915 onwards (Dvořák & Dvořáková, 2005). In Slovak schools, that did not happen until 1930-1933 (Kancír & Madziková, 2003), after the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. It took several years for the two traditions (Austrian and Hungarian) to merge together in a single one. The new subject



was given the name *vlastiveda*, an etymological derivation from the translation of the German word *Heimatkunde*, and referred to in English as local studies. The aim of the subject was not just to teach pupils about scientific advances and knowledge (the facts), but, as its name clearly indicates, it was also about reinforcing pupils' emotional relationship with their country, inculcating a healthy pride. This was of course related to the mood at the time: in the centre of Europe (especially Prussia) the idea of the nation – predominantly as an ethical construct – was being established.

The First Czechoslovak Republic was founded in 1918 and lasted until 1939. During the Second World War, Slovakia was an independent republic – a satellite state of Nazi Germany – while Czechia was a protectorate under direct Nazi German control. After the Second World War, the Czechoslovak Republic was refounded with adjustments to its borders, having lost Ruthenia to the Soviet Union. In February 1948, there was a coup and the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia took power, installing a totalitarian regime. That remained in place until the Velvet Revolution of 1989, which reinstated democracy in the country. On 1 January 1993, following unsuccessful negotiations over the nature of the common state, two suc-

cessor states were formed – the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic.

Over this period and in both better and worse times, local studies underwent a series of changes, including changes to content, goals (sometimes of an ideological and indoctrinal nature), and the number of lessons per year. The aim here is not to recount all the changes to the subject but to stress an important point: irrespective of whether criticism of local studies is aimed at its content, the way it is taught, or how it is conceived, we can trace the names of the experts or teachers involved in the debates, who discussed it at meetings of teachers or in the journals of the time, especially during the periods of freedom.<sup>1</sup> Within the technical possibilities of the time (or lack thereof), they were able to maintain a notional dialogue, or dispute, in which they attempted to improve and shape the subject through reform.<sup>2</sup>

This point is worth stressing because subject content has changed a number of times since 1993. The largest education reform, both in terms of organisation and content, did not, however, take place until 2008, when the two-level curriculum was introduced. It was then further revised in 2015, in effect 2016, to make improvements. These changes also affected *local studies* as taught in primary schools – and if the revisions

<sup>1</sup> Czech and Slovak readers will probably be familiar with names such as Strnad, Kořínek, Korejs, Černý, Šimek, Nedbálek, and Dominik.

<sup>2</sup> The announcement of a 'Survey on Local Studies' in 1932/1933 in the periodical *Tvořivá škola*, to which 17 authors responded, was an interesting beginning (Navrátilová et al., 2002).



were intended to improve on the original ideas, or goals, then one would expect them to be the result of expert debate, not to mention empirical evidence from education research. The contributions from teachers and experts in the Czechoslovak era would probably not stand up to today's standards regarding research findings/evidence, but let us at least entertain the idea that they were more fruitful and productive than current education research on local studies. There are no articles in Slovak journals and periodicals in which academics address the way in which local studies is taught, regarding the content, the aims, or the teaching methods.

We cannot pretend there are no problems with local studies. From the very beginning, experts have argued over whether it should be more general or country-specific, factual, linguistic, or simply offer guidance. They have argued over whether the content should be incidental or situated, which it should most resemble social or human science, and which system should be used to structure the content, and they have even argued about pupils going on trips and doing activities instead of just sitting there passively learning. And that is before we get to the status of local studies as viewed by the teachers and pupils, and noted by Klusák (2010). All these questions remain unresolved today. Moreover, the lack of theoretic-

cal and empirical research in this area means we can hardly expect matters to improve.<sup>3</sup>

Stará (1999) is right to state that curricular content that draws on social science knowledge is always the result of the country's historical, cultural, and educational traditions. But she also stresses that the curriculum should reflect the societal needs of the country and respond to the "need to educate people in the spirit of global understanding and a responsible attitude to life in the 21st century" (p. 77). Therefore, this article focuses on two specific areas in an attempt to show the potential harm caused by the neglect of local studies. In the first half we will consider the content, then in the second half we turn our attention to teaching methods.

## EXPANDING THE CONTENT

It is only with great difficulty that we can talk of a universal social studies and humanities curriculum applicable in primary education across the world. The content naturally reflects the local context within which the subject(s) emerged (social and human knowledge need not be restricted to a single subject at the primary level). To illustrate this, we need only look at the last comparative study by Dvořák and Dvořáková (2018), in which they attempt to compare the form, scope, and methods of

<sup>3</sup> A comparative study by Dvořák and Dvořáková (2018) begins by stating that, as the curriculum is currently being revised in the Czech Republic, it would be desirable to know something about the process and content of the reforms and discussions in other countries.



developing the primary school history curriculum in three English-speaking countries: one might assume a certain level of resemblance, given the cultural similarity of the United States, England, and Australia, but it is hard to find any strong correspondence. The content is framed by the fact that the history curriculum deals with social and human knowledge and so obviously does not cover natural science.<sup>4</sup> Numerous disciplines are represented, but those that feature most frequently are elements of geography, history, economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, ecology, and civic education (Doliopoulou, 1995; Sunal, 1980).

The Slovak tradition of teaching social and human knowledge at the primary level is quite different to the one found in English-speaking countries; nevertheless, it is not uniform either. Our historical experiences have led to social studies being concentrated around two main disciplines – geography and history, with a focus on an emotional and patriotic accent. The emphasis on civic education and fostering civic participation is not found in Slovakia. These days, two subjects are taught at the primary level in Slovakia (history and geography) that prepare pupils for the lower secondary level: in the first two years of primary school, pupils study *knowledge and understanding of the world*, which is a combined

subject (natural science with elements of social and human knowledge); in the third and fourth years they are taught *local studies*.

Amid the changes that began in 2008, no one thought to expand local studies to include other types of social and human knowledge. The way the content is currently structured could do with updating so as to better reflect *People and Society*, the area of education under which the two subjects are taught. If pupils are supposed to learn about social phenomena and processes in this area of education, presumably it should not be centred around the familiar concepts of space and time, or the subjects to which they belong (history/geography). Working with a map and using a timeline are, of course, key concepts but are not part of the preparatory function of local studies (or knowledge and understanding of the world). It is not just that the name *People and Society* suggests a wider topic area, but that pupils should also be learning about the things around them and that interest them. This is not to suggest that the subject needs a truly radical overhaul but merely to question whether some topics are being neglected because they are considered too advanced for this age group. Stage 1 primary pupils do not live in a vacuum but are confronted with these topics in daily life and may even be negatively

<sup>4</sup> However, we should note that up until 1976 local studies contained a natural science component, bringing together biology, chemistry, and physics.



affected by them. Back in 1930, when the first social science subjects were beginning to take shape at the primary level (in the independent Czechoslovak Republic), Černý (1930/1931) argued that the content should be up to date. Not all traditions are bad, but alone “they are insufficient. We have to take account of what contemporary life brings, and that should be reflected in schools as well” (Černý, 1930/1931, p. 327).

The idea that social science is inappropriate and of little interest to Stage 1 primary pupils has been refuted by various studies. For example, the Czech expert Michaela Dvořáková (2009, 2012, 2013) researched children’s grasp of society as part of her work on teaching methods. She drew on unfinished research by František Jiránek (forcibly halted in 1977) and subsequently revived by Eva Vyskočilová (Vyskočilová & Morgado, 2000; Vyskočilová, 2006), and on research from other countries (Berti & Bombi, 1988; Berti & Andriolo, 2001; Berti, 2002, 2004; Brophy & Alleman, 2002).

The Czech curriculum for local studies and knowledge and understanding of the world was originally based on history and geography, but it has evolved considerably. The original foundations are still there, but the

curriculum also covers topics that are not the exclusive terrain of history and geography.<sup>5</sup> When teaching local studies and understanding and knowledge of the world, the teacher and children can discuss issues such as the republic, democracy, parliament, diversity in children and families around the world, bullying, advertising, media, and private and public property. This is because the area of education relating to social science in the curriculum (People and the World) refers to content and standards – which we include under political science, economics, and law – that are covered in culture and global issues. This highly diverse content is made possible by the framework programme document (Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání, 2017), which is used when designing textbooks.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the Slovak curricular framework does not allow this.

Turning to an example of one of these areas – economics – we see that the education ministry has included financial literacy among the cross-cutting topics (Národný štandard finančnej gramotnosti, 2014). Economic content is therefore mainly reduced to finance and the ability to make responsible decisions (for more, see Danišková, 2018), but it is possible to expose pupils

<sup>5</sup> One series of primary school textbooks that are available to teachers in Czechia is called Society, not Local Studies.

<sup>6</sup> The Czech and Slovak primary levels differ in length: the Czech one is five years and the Slovak one four. The possible objection that topics not covered during the first four years could appear in the fifth does not hold because there is no separate civic education subject in Year 5 (geography and history are separate subjects).



systematically to a wider range of economic concepts, and not just through incidental teaching. The Czech education studies group around František Jiránek showed how this can be done. The influence of this group can still be seen in Czech textbooks today.

## **DIDACTICS**

Contemporary education studies, like many other disciplines, feels the need to respond to requests for pragmatism emanating from society. A wide range of areas is under pressure from pragmatic rationality: the preference may be for applied research as it leads to useful and life-enhancing findings (Štech, 2020) or for employment-focused subjects or studies that emphasise experience and practicability. This last applies to the university education required by all teachers wishing to teach in the compulsory education sector. In this case, the response is to increase the practical component and quality of practice for future teachers, but the emphasis is also on didactics. It is this latter that distinguishes historians from history teachers and physicists from physics teachers, helping them understand the way pupils learn.<sup>7</sup> The focus on teaching skills – the part of education studies that has the potential to distinguish, specialise, save, and, above all, professionalise teachers

(see, for example, Duschinská & High, 2019; Slavík et al., 2017a, 2017b) – has recently become a crucial component, and this gives hope that we live in an era of skills – of both general and specialist skills.

The previous part attempted to describe the excessive rigidity of the content of human and social science subjects at primary school. This rigidity could be defended if the partial didactics were sufficiently developed and the subject of serious research. However, this idea should be treated with a hefty dose of scepticism.

Despite the increasing popularity of didactics, they receive little attention in education debates in Slovakia (social studies). And, even worse, the limited but interesting research that is available is ignored. Education studies students will encounter textbooks on didactics for local studies (e.g. Navrátilová, 2002; Kancír & Madziková, 2003; Korim et al., 1995) from which they can learn something of the history of the subject and the methods and resources (general teaching methods) and gain the feeling that trips and experiential learning are considered important, or that there are gaps in their knowledge of geography and history (limited knowledge of cultural background studies, history), but they will learn nothing about pedagogical content knowledge, which is of much greater importance (Janík, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of reflective practice introduces hope into the dichotomy; Czech readers will be familiar with it thanks to the work of Janík and Najvar (2011).



The human and social science components of knowledge and understanding of the world and, in later years, local studies are preparatory subjects for the subsequent study of geography and history – orientation in time and space underpin the content and the emphasis is on grasping two basic key concepts, *maps* and *timelines*. These two concepts are taught to children at an age when they do not yet think like adults, and the concepts are hard to grasp – not because they are difficult but because the children have yet to develop the necessary cognitive processes. Many of the terms used in local studies lessons are not part of a primary school child's active verbal vocabulary (such as the scale of a map). But that does not matter since they are merely used in relation to the activities associated with them and consequently there is no need to provide explicit definitions (Machalová, 2004/2005). One can identify a constructivist approach behind this argument, but while such approaches need not always be the preferred choice, they can prove useful and produce good results when used in relation to key elements of local studies content.

Similar didactic experiments have been used in Czechoslovak settings, including some that are much older (Jiránek, 1974; Vyskočilová, 1973, 1976; Pupala, 1994) than the textbook didactics mentioned above. It is there-

fore surprising to find that these approaches, which work and make sense, are not used and that we are unable to develop them and include them in our textbooks.

Moreover, research reports and the professional literature by the Czech “school” of Jiránek and Vyskočilová both explain and justify the need for pupils to have personal experience and take their time, and they also provide a step-by-step model for guiding pupils through the first to last years of primary education – this can be found in the textbooks of which Eva Vyskočilová is the main author (Vyskočilová et al., 2000a, 2000b, 2001). The textbooks take the pupils through a set of exercises and problems covering topics of interest to them at that age and before they come across terms such as *timelines*, *centuries*, and *maps*.<sup>8</sup>

For example, back in 1976, in relation to developing the foundations of historical thinking, Eva Vyskočilová showed how the traditional learning content relating to the calendar can serve as a means of decentring pupil thinking, which is crucial to basic pupil development. Nowadays, teachers can choose from a number of social studies textbooks, but only two are state-funded (two on local studies and two on knowledge and understanding of the world). These textbooks (or workbooks) have done well in public

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<sup>8</sup> The results of pedagogical (didactic) research are offered directly to practitioners, and thus the obstacle formulated by Průcha (2020) does not apply.





competitions, but when we come to look at the way the calendar is taught, it is clear that none of these textbooks exploits it fully. While Vyskočilová calls for relationships and operational tasks that prompt pupils to go back in time, the calendar itself is produced by the children. By contrast, Slovak textbooks present traditional models of the calendar in which the various parts are learnt orally along with the order they come in and their interrelations, but the provided calendar represents the starting point, not the end point, of the lesson (Adame & Kováčiková, 2015, pp. 24-25; Adame & Kováčiková, 2016, pp. 22-23; Kožuchová & Rochovská, 2018a, pp. 12-13, Kožuchová & Rochovská, 2018b, pp. 14-15). The supplementary teaching materials that are available on the market do not contain activities presented in the way Vyskočilová presents them. For example, tests for Year 2 and Year 3 pupils (Timčíková, 2011) contain exercises in which the pupils have to say which part is incorrect – in the weekday version, pupils have to name six days, with one of the days being spelt incorrectly (*sreda* vs *streda*, or Wednesday instead of Wednesday); in the weekend version three items are given, with the incorrect one being *nedelník* [weekly] (instead of *nedela* [Sunday]), while in a workbook called *Hravá vlastiveda* (Adamová et al., 2017) the calendar is not covered at all.

But we need not rely on Czech experience alone. A Slovak academic,

Pupala, conducted key research into children's cartography. Pupala does not consider maps to be mere examples or teaching aids; instead they “resemble texts with a special symbolic language” (Pupala & Mašková, 1997, p. 327). Consequently, he argues that they should be used for the “early activation of cartographical cognitive methods” or for the “cognitive stimulation of children using cartographic materials prior to the acquisition of the conventional principles of cartographic illustrations” (ibid). Drawing on his research findings, Pupala recommends using such teaching approaches with younger children before they come to learn about proper maps. Here it is crucial to use materials containing plans or maps accompanied by a series of tasks that motivate the children to come to understand how the space is graphically illustrated. The Czech experience of experiments and the subsequent textbooks and Pupala's experiment from 1994 are disregarded in contemporary Slovak textbooks aimed at the first two years of primary education, which still present the materials using verbal instructions that take little account of the individual's constructivist genesis of conceptual notions (Adame & Kováčiková, 2015, 2016), and in some case do not even do that (Kožuchová & Rochovská, 2018a, 2018b). The textbooks lack exercises dealing with spatial relations (reversibility, hypothetical changes in the viewing angle, the I-object/object-I relation), which form



part of the basic skill set required for map work, as Šebková and Vyskočilová (1997) in the Czech Republic have shown.

The teams of textbook designers focus on making textbooks appealing and inventive. They provide a wealth of activation tasks such as puzzles, word searches and riddles, project ideas, and web or online support, but the innovative and novelty aspects should be based on the latest teaching approaches, and the foundations of these lie elsewhere. Textbook writers would do better to seek author exclusivity in the adept instructional transformation of the subject matter, but that requires expertise and in-depth knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to outline the future direction of primary social studies in Slovakia. The Czech Republic was selected as the referential framework for this exercise. It would, after all, be insensitive to adopt a primary social studies model from a country with a very different historical and social backdrop. Neighbouring Czechia has been used in an attempt to show that the subjects relating to social science may have different historical backgrounds, but that does not mean that the subject content must be fixed and immutable. Nor does it mean that teaching approaches should continue to reproduce clumsy

and unproductive classifications and definitions.

Changes and innovations in education should be introduced in a cautious and carefully-thought-out manner. Academics and school teachers can be too quick to trust the latest fashionable trends in content and methodology that they find appealing and seem easy. Nonetheless, that is not the case described here: the social studies suggestions are a natural step in curricular and didactic development.

The type of content change that could enhance primary education is not ideologically oriented, but consists of topics that are naturally represented in social studies and humanities education (the economic concepts of the division of labour or limited resources do not represent an ideological conception of financial literacy). Nor is this type of content artificial, or imported from a different educational “culture”. Inspiration can be found closer to home, in a country with which we have a close relationship and a shared history.

Despite recent developments in didactics, Slovak primary social studies does not draw on the available guidelines and approaches for teaching pupils the difficult core topics of temporal and spatial orientation at this level. It is a shame that so little attention has been paid to the experiments conducted in the past, particularly since incorporating them into teaching requires little in the way of additional resources and funding.



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## DANIŠKOVÁ, Z. Spoločenskovedné učebné predmety primárneho stupňa: porovnanie Slovenska a Českej republiky

*Text sa zameriava na učebné predmety primárneho vzdelávania (ISCED1) na Slovensku, ktoré reprezentujú socio-humanitné poznávanie, v konfrontácii so situáciou v Čechách. Ponúka najskôr stručný historický kontext vzniku takýchto učebných predmetov, ktorý prirodzene ovplyvňuje ich ďalšiu podobu. Potom sa venuje obsahovej náplni predmetov, v ktorej sa snažíme zdôvodniť nie celkom oprávnený stagnujúci stav. Následne sa snažíme ukázať, že napriek opätovnému znovu-objaveniu didaktiky takmer neexistuje moderný didaktický výskum v týchto predmetoch, ktoré ho vzhľadom na vek dieťaťa primárneho vzdelávania potrebujú. Na záver textu konštatujeme, že absentujúci živý pedagogický výskum a diskurz tak nemôže ovplyvniť vzdelávaciu politiku s jej kurikulárnymi reformami.*

**Kľúčové slová:** spoločenskovedné učebné predmety primárneho stupňa základnej školy SR, obsahy učebných predmetov, didaktika spoločenskovedných učebných predmetov