

CZ 3 school level case study

Writing and methodological approach Czech Republic

In the following case studies which present good practice in relation to active/advancing learning in collaborative environments (ALICE) - sometimes shortened to “collaborative learning”, it must be recognised that these are interpretations of interpretations (including translation from one language into the target language of English as *lingua franca*). The author is necessarily interpreting both what has been seen by that individual and what has been told to that person by others, who interpret the world and present it as they see and understand it. The reader of the case studies will also interpret the written words and other materials presented through the lens of their own experience and understanding.

The principle method for data generation for all the cases was a semi-structured interview devised by the author on the basis of guidelines given by the partners responsible for the initial research exercise to extract examples of good practice in teachers’ collaborative learning. In two of the cases, which feature good practice at local and school levels respectively, the author of the case studies presented was fortunate enough to have observed those players (actors) involved in the course of the activities which are deemed to be good practice. Additional research to seek to understand the central themes of the case studies was also undertaken.

Thus, although they are necessarily context-dependent and “laced with imperfection” (<http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=qualitative&pageid=icb.page340906> -accessed 05042016), the stories presented will seek to demonstrate to a broad and diverse audience, the goodness of the professional practice, revealing the common facets of this gem in the process of learning.

Context

In order to comprehend more fully these stories that follow, the author outlines below some key facts about the Czech Republic and its education system. The sources for these facts may be found at:

<https://www.oecd.org/edu/EAG2012%20-%20Key%20Facts%20-%20Czech%20Republic.pdf>
file:///Users/glynnkirkham/Downloads/MSMT_Education2012-web.pdf

The Czech Republic is to be found in the centre of Europe. It has an area of 78,866 km². For administrative purposes there are 14 regions including the capital city, Prague. Each region is divided into municipalities. There is a population of 10.5 million inhabitants, approximately 1.2 million live in the capital city. Only five other towns had a population which exceeds 100,000. It can thus be recognised that there are many small towns and villages. Three ancient areas are still culturally significant: Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia.

There are a number of minority groups from neighbouring countries such as the Republics of Slovakia, Poland, Germany and Austria. There is also a significant Roma population. Other foreigners include those from the Ukraine, Vietnam, Russia and those from Western European countries with residence permits.

With some minor exceptions, the language of instruction in schools is Czech, which belongs to the western Slavic family of languages.

From 1945 until 1989, a member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Czech Republic has about a third of its population with any religious affinity. More than 80% of those declare themselves to be members of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Czech Republic has its own monetary unit, the koruna, and is outside the Eurozone.

Unemployment in the Czech Republic is about 7%.

It is a parliamentary democracy with a bicameral system – an assembly of 200 deputies elected under the proportional system and a Senate with 81 members, plus an elected president. The government is composed of a coalition headed by a Prime Minister. There is also a President who has significant powers as well as the title of head of state.

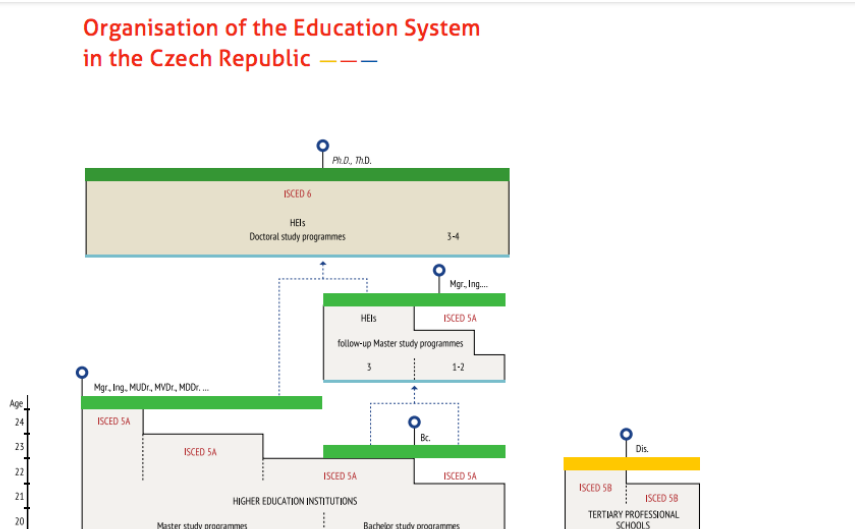
Public administration is carried out via central state administration together with self governing regional and local authorities (regions and municipalities). Following the Velvet Revolution, in 1989, and the creation of Czechoslovakia and then divorce in 1993, the Czech education system was transformed first as a result of the fall of the communist regime. In the area of educational administration, substantial changes affected the competencies of the Ministry were implemented after 1989. On 13th December 1990, the Czech National Council introduced a regional, decentralised school system. The municipality and the newly-established school authorities had autonomy. Teachers stopped being 'civil servants'. During this period, Olomouc became the administrative centre for Moravia and Silesia. In 2002, new reform gave school administration to the municipal and regional offices. School administration today lies mainly with the headteachers, who also have the right "to hire and fire". Each school has a set of founders but these have little active engagement with the schools policy-writing or management except in the appointment of headteacher. Schools and thereby headteachers have thus great autonomy.

Teachers and headteachers in the Czech Republic are comparatively poorly remunerated relative to teachers and headteachers in many parts of Europe. Class sizes are fixed at a maximum of 25 pupils per class. Contracted hours are also comparatively lower than in some other European countries.(OECD, 2013) A newly-developed career system is currently passing through legislation. There is no prescribed national curriculum (but an advisory one exists) and teachers are free to teach as they professionally adjudicate. As is also the case in number of other European countries, there is no national testing to assess learning progress until the age of 18. Success in this test is the normal route to higher education.

Compulsory school attendance is required for all children from the age of 6 to 15 years. Participation in early childhood education for children from the age of four years old is just under 90%. The Polish minority has its own schools which are allowed to teach in Polish. There are 25 nursery schools, 21 elementary schools and three upper secondary schools for this minority group.

The following diagram gives a visual description of the current education system in the Czech Republic.

Diagram



Additionally, a significant player in the field of education and in service of teachers is the N I DV (the National Institute for Continuing Professional Development) which has a long tradition of providing in-service education in the Czech Republic. It was founded in 2005 as a quasi-autonomous subsidiary organisation of the Ministry nationwide and it succeeds the earlier activities of the former thirteen regional educational centres, plus Prague. NIDV implement the agreed targets of the state educational policy and integration programmes in Czech and European education, in line with changes in education management and institutional support the continuing education of the players in the field. It focuses primarily on the implementation and promotion of the priority topics of national educational policy and also in its offer reflects the needs of teachers and schools in individual regions. Nationally and regionally, eight also offers educational programmes, which are financially supported by the European Social Fund (individual national projects, individual projects, others grant projects) and, in some cases, the stated budget.

Through its programmes in print and electronic form (www.nidv.cz) allows NIDV education teachers, methodologists, directors and school managers (functional training), and through seminars, courses, educational cycles and long-term training programmes that can be to organise and to order the entire teaching corps or more schools in the catchment area of the region. It uses the broad base of trainers and also works closely with universities and other institutions. Creating a concept of service teacher training and lifelong learning in the Czech Republic, provides educational, methodical and supportive services to schools and school facilities, performs various research investigations, provides information about new trends and changes in education or intentions statewide educational policy and the exchange of experiences among the professional school populace.

Case study 3 school level case study

This case study is about authenticity as an essential element in the collaborative learning process. As with other case studies, the text derives both from translated material and a semi-structured interview as well as calling on other research material and prior personal knowledge of the situation and individuals involved.

It is about a school and about the way in which the individuals working there come to be there and about the basis on which the school one where most who believe in schools would wish to have their own young family attend.

Principle-centred leadership and total commitment to creating a culture of learning and honesty figure strongly in the success of this school.

Context

In a part of Prague, where, in this particular sector, the streets are named after the capital cities of Europe, sits one of the most over-subscribed state primary schools in the city. Go back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century and you would see there from 1893, the opening of the new Vinohrady Gymnasium (academic secondary school) which would, with its large sports hall, educate the minds and bodies of its students, one alumnus would become President of Czechoslovakia, not once but twice and yet another, later in the history of the state, the second President of the new Czech Republic. Remove the parked cars from the street together with some of the street furniture and you could be back at the end of the 19th century, with typically Austro-Hungarian architecture on both sides of this avenue looking at this fine 4/5 storey building. For more than 50 years, however, the building has housed an elementary school catering for children from the age of six to 15 years of age.

It is the afternoon. I have a mid-afternoon appointment with the headteacher and deputy and possibly a second deputy. It all depends on their availability. I enter the building and begin my walk upstairs to the second floor where can be found the headteacher's office. As I begin my ascent, I am confronted by young children leaving from their class or school club as they excitedly make their way homeward to tell their parents what they had done today. One nine years old young lady asked me if I needed help and if I knew where to go. I told her that it was okay but she insisted on

escorting me to the door of the headteachers office. I thanked her and then like a good fairy she flew down the stairs to make up for the time she had lost. I knocked at the open door and was greeted by the headteacher from the far side of the room.

Tenets held.

The basic pillars of the curriculum at this Elementary School are:

1. to integrate the teaching of individual subjects, which is to enable pupils to understand the world in a broad context.
2. that students work with different information sources (Internet, textbooks, encyclopedias, interviews with interesting personalities).
3. to know individual educational needs and adapt teaching to them - devote adequate attention to gifted students and students with learning disabilities.
4. Verbal assessment of pupils, to capture the individual pupil's progress during the evaluation period and help her/him in her/his further development.
5. Positive relationships between teacher and student
6. Work with parents, which is an integral part of the work of teachers of the school. Parents are seen as partners that can positively influence what happens in school.
7. Developing skills of co-operation and communication as students work in teams. This inter alia takes the form of school-wide projects and the fact that individual classes within a year group work closely together.
8. The week is the basic unit of time for scheduled teaching activity.
9. Support against adverse effects through a prevention programme for students to develop a positive self-image and to develop positive social interaction and feeling.

Among the attractions that are not common in every school, are included:

First foreign language (English) in the form of study group from the 1st year.

Second foreign language (Spanish) as an optional subject usually from 5th grade and as a compulsory subject for all pupils from the 7th year.

A normal part of teaching students to access the Internet (in all classrooms). Students use computers in the classroom from the 1st year - from the use of learning programs, work with text and spreadsheet editor to create their own websites and work with digital media.

School annually organises leisure activities for students by offering about 60 clubs.

The school even has its own song (the Czech version may be downloaded here).

Download <http://www.londynska.cz/hymna.mp3>

Within the verses of the song, we hear that "Each and every pupil goes happily to the school we like, where the teachers are our friends." This is not just an idle lyric but a verifiable statement describing a school where "There's a nice atmosphere, and time passes quickly". After their nine years, students emerge as a unique individuals "equipped with knowledge and ready for life." The school is different. There are children from other cultures who attend. The Czech Republic is largely monocultural and diversity within schools - though increasing - is rare.

The meeting

Sitting before his office computer is the frame of the nearly two-metres' tall occupant of the role of the headteacher. Originally appointed as headteacher in August 2005 and reappointed in 2012 (the Czech system required for headteachers a procedure of appointment, or dismissal and reassignment as a teacher every six years), the headteacher had begun his career as a young teacher in the school in 1987. He became the deputy head in 2000 and five years later assumed the role of headteacher.

Description of the school

Completeness and school size

The school is full with nine successive years of classes. At the first stage are three classes in a year, the second stage of two parallel classes in grade. The school includes the following facilities: a school with a capacity of 560 pupils, school clubs with a capacity of 250 pupils, school club with a capacity of 80 pupils and canteen.

Characteristics of teaching staff

Members of the teaching staff tend to open communication with all participants in the educational process - pupils, their legal representatives and the wider public. Important partners are also professional relationships among teachers. Individual teachers do not work only for themselves within their "own" their subject or class. On the education of students work together in year-group teams. The core business of school teachers is planned and systematic development of key competencies. To do this, they use a wide range of educational strategies, methods and organisational forms.

The development of communication skills, teamwork and expanding range of educational methods used also directed further education of teachers. It is planned based on the evaluation of the needs of schools and professional interests of teachers.

The teaching staff are governed by the Code of Ethics of teaching staff which they created and approved.

The size of the teaching staff, its vocational skills development and meet objectives that are set out therein.

We are sitting in a small part of the office under set of stairs which lead to a mezzanine floor and store above. Each of the classrooms has the same configuration taking advantage of the exceptionally high ceilings established in the original building of the school. It is, today, the senior deputy who has given his time to talk with me. He has been at the school since the year 2000 as a teacher and since 2007 as deputy headteacher. AreWithin the same space at a desk by the window, sits the headteacher, busily occupied by a task to be completed on the computer in front.

The management team of the school consists of the headteacher and two deputies. The three pedagogues do not compose the full complement. They are ably assisted by the competencies of a business manager/accountant.

In addition, there is a set of ten teachers who operate with the senior management group at the strategic level for pedagogic matters and at a tactical level with regard to the overall practice in school.

There are a number of committees. A major one is, of course, the finance committee, which is composed of the senior management group Plus the accountant.

With regard to human resources, there is an annual review for each teacher. This requires 15 meetings for each of the senior management group with the teacher over a two-month period and with a minimum of one hour allocated per individual.

There is additionally a new parents' committee at which meetings, the headteacher or one of the deputies is in attendance and to give guidance and information with regard to the practice and policy in school.

The headteacher also teaches, as required by Czech law, a minimum five lessons per week. In addition, he with the deputies will also be involved each week in three or four consultations with teachers about their practice.

There is a weekly senior management group meeting which includes the business manager. There is a weekly review tasks completed, observations - including teacher observations, and future planning.

There is a very clear agenda which relates to the school's agreed development plan.

While the business of these meetings is being transacted, it is the only time when the door to the headteacher's office is closed to all except the senior management group. During my meeting with the deputy, the door to the headteachers office which we were sitting remained open.

An open door policy is consistent with the principles and philosophy held by the headteacher and his colleagues in school. Whilst I was conducting the interview, several children came to the door and their needs were attended to by the headteacher or by the deputy who excused himself temporarily in order to deal with an urgent matter. He acted as a barrier to access to the headteacher since he knew that the headteacher was dealing with matters of equal urgency and importance for the future of the school. He knew because he was informed by the headteacher about his agenda for the afternoon. He knew also the child and about the domestic situation which was causing the child concern. The deputy was not the class teacher for this child. Information flow within the school at a professional level is very high and is managed well. New line

The large windows on the street-side of the school gives light to the office in which they sitting. The headteacher's desk is also the deputies' desk. They sit opposite one another behind screens and before screens. Every day, they face one another and converse about matters relating to the school and also in some small talk. Pushing into the space in the room from and attached to their peninsular is another arc. Here are sitting place for others, be it children, parents, teachers or other members of the school community - attached to the headteacher's.

Examples of learning

When working with parents, the strategy employed by the headteacher (and his colleagues) is that of discussion and learning together. Is important to listen to what parents had to say about the development of the school and how they might give support but all should be considered within the school's approach and fundamental principles. There was an occasion when the parents wanted to donate something which did not fit within the philosophy and practice within the school. After much discussion, the parents came to understand why the headteacher and his team were resolutely against the proposal and acknowledged the professional stance taken, withdrawing the offer. Throughout the discussions, Mutual respect was evident and an understanding was reached unable to progress to be made in a manner which did not impact on the modus operandi of the school.

Judgements made without evidence (and strong evidence at that) do not occur at the school. In all cases, needs are assessed on the basis of evidence. Teachers have developed self-reflection as practitioners operating within the context and potential confines of the school's policy. They may or may not have been actively involved in the development of the policy paper but they will be made aware of the content and expectations of practice in relation thereto.

When vacancies for teaching posts occur, there is great competition for places. The school is recognised as an outstanding example of good practice. Students in faculties of education at a number of universities near and far seek a place for their practice in the school. The school is able to select very carefully those who recognise and appreciate the fundamental principles and practice and who are able to complement such in their own practice.

Within the Czech system of teacher education student teachers have a relatively short period actively working as teachers in schools before certification. The first year (exceptionally two years) of teaching after certification acts as a probationary period. If the practice of the new teacher (who will be supported by a mentor and by other members of the team to which the class belongs) is not a good enough and there is insufficient potential for growth then the teacher Will be removed from the school. There is no hesitation in this line of action since it is not in the best interests of the children in the school. In a popular school, like the one in this case study, it is not difficult to find good replacements who are willing to work hard and to work within and to adopt the philosophy, principles and practice of the school.

There is mutual respect and no kowtowing to anyone no matter what their status. Any arguments presented must be soundly based on evidence. The headteacher is properly intolerant of mere conjecture.

One example given is that of the headteacher questioning the authority of an inspector who was demanding a particular action is the response from the headteacher to that demand, "Tell me where it says I must!" The inspector could not. He did not have knowledge of the regulations which the headteacher knew - almost by heart.

Opportunities to discuss purposefully and with mutual respect are welcomed.

The senior leadership team work together well, each has specific responsibility but work as a team in order to carry out the many tasks required. Decisions are made after full discussion. No documents are signed without their content being shared (in a professionally sensitive manner). Everything is discussed and in full knowledge of those involved and those concerned.

Not only is the headteacher wedded to the school, he is also the husband of one of the teachers. The senior deputy is similarly circumstanced.

Planetary differences between men and women have (I was informed) sometimes generated great discussion and search for understanding by the headteacher and his senior Deputy.

Account of the good practice

What then is that good practice in relation to the collaborative learning of teachers? Everything here is predicated on authenticity and transparency. Decisions made are based on the evidence available. Everything here is predicated on the principles of honesty and equity. Everything here is openly discussed and joint decisions are binding. Issues relating to the pedagogic and professional practice of teachers in the school are openly discussed, debated and decided upon based on the Best interests of the students in the school.

Each group of teachers for each year of students' activities discuss and plan together within the overall parameters of the school's development plan. At weekly meetings, they review and revise based on what they have learned from work with students and from one another in their discussions. Each teacher has a portfolio her/his own reflective practice. This is a working document which is accessed only by teacher and her/his supervising member of the leadership team.

Members of the leadership team are not only actively engaged in the supervision and mentoring of the new teachers to the school but also in the direct observation of the teaching and learning process in all the classes in the school, regardless of the length of experience of the teacher. They give feedback to the teachers on the strengths and the areas for development as observed and house considered by the teachers in their own reflection on their practice. Thus, is built up a very strong base of evidence about the learning processes and the impact on the practice of teachers and students. Decisions and reports are consequently robust.

What is fundamentally important to all involved is the sharing of knowledge and making it public to the professionals who need it for their practice including what has been learned from continuing professional development.

Participative professionalism

While it is recognised that the headteacher has ultimate responsibility and is ultimately accountable for the practices carried out in the school, those working in the school and those working for the

school recognise out there and contribution is respected and acknowledged whenever decisions have to be made which have an impact on school practice. Decisions about the direction of the curriculum which sits within general framework given by the state are made at the local level. What this means in terms of the school's practice is that the teachers decide what is to teach and when. In some schools, this may be without reference to the headteacher.

The following code of ethics which was drawn up, developed and agreed by the teachers and other educational workers in the school is based on the overriding principles of professional transparency and authenticity.

“The Code of Ethics of teaching staff

Members of the teaching staff:

- a. shall, according to the best of their knowledge and skills, consider and make decisions on the basis of and in accord with the principles of humanity and democracy;
- b. understand their role in terms of being a member of the helping professions and do not use positional power to manipulate and/or for private or personal gain;
- c. apply equal access to all students and reject all forms of discrimination or behaviour that oppresses others;
- d. treat cautiously with confidential information about pupils and never apply such to the detriment and disadvantage pupil or to strengthen their position;
- e. respect the physical and psychological autonomy and uniqueness of both pupils and colleagues and parents. Likewise, they respects their personalities, their needs and the right to self-realisation;
- f. support the development of the skills and abilities of students according to their choices with regard to developmental needs, age difference and the maturity;
- g. develop versatile students with different potential;
- h. maintain and develop an appropriate environment for learning;
- i. respect the student as a unique individual, respecting his health, language and other specifics;
- j. are obliged to become acquainted with information about the specific educational needs of pupils, whom they are teaching; they have the right to request such information;
- k. shall draw upon all available means based on positive incentives before employing disciplinary action;
- l. work with colleagues and other professionals and lay people in the interest of pupils.

The working teams in the school are committed to the strategy and the objectives of the school and to the utilisation of teamwork in pursuit of these.

Those working in the school openly communicate issues to be resolved in order to address and overcome problems. The professional competence of colleagues is to be respected. They understand that open communication and co-operation are essential elements in the process of organising the educational process.

They recognise and understand that continuous self-education is necessary to deepen and develop their professional competence. They seek to actualise the professional interests they hold in relation to the development of their pupils and of the school. The school leadership and management team supports and enables this approach to professional, self-development this self-supporting and applies, in the best interests of the individual and of the school, any necessary adjustments or control. With increased knowledge and awareness through personal, professional development teachers should seek to apply such in their practice at the school and to support colleagues.

Teachers regularly carry out self-assessment of their work.

Teachers are required to recognise and put into practice the fact that the school rules apply to all.

Teachers are aware of and understand that their positive behaviour and actions has an impact on students. Since teachers are aware that the quality of students' work is directly proportional to and dependent upon the right mental and physical balance, they, therefore, create healthy conditions for learning, including for requests for assistance.

Teachers are aware that any form of unethical behaviour is unacceptable, not only for their own sakes, but also for that of their colleagues. Education is incompatible with such action and it should not be ignored nor tolerated without seeking redress. Any matters of this nature should be directed to the attention of and will be addressed by the school leadership and management team.

All members of staff are entitled to information about events at school and have the right to comment on all matters relating to the running of the school, respectively and to propose amendments.

It is recognised that, outside the school day, teachers will necessarily spend non-teaching time and non-preparation time in order to carry out activities connected with their professional duties, for example, discussions with colleagues, parents and students about their work. Some teachers may choose to engage with other activities, for example, a school interest club, within what would otherwise be their private time.”

Advancement of equity

Through active involvement of personnel at all levels in decision-making: personal responsibility for self-reflection, decision-making and team level for all your groups and a consensual and professional approach to matters policy and practice, teachers develop a clear sense of involvement. Each is allowed to offer their professional judgement and to have this considered as a valued contribution to any discussion.

Like the schools in the Czech Republic, there is a school Parliament which develops notions of democracy for all participants: teachers and children. At the case study school, the voice of the children is listened to and considered with equal respect as the voice of teachers and the senior leadership team.

What is learned in the course of discussion and debate is, In all circumstances, the basis for future action.

Collaborative enquiry

As well as engaging in and deriving the code of ethics by which to practice, teachers in the school are involved in collaborative enquiry not only within the school it also within communities of practice involving other schools and involving also faculties of education and educational charities. They have been actively involved in, for example, the educational project, “What is quality?”, the development of reflective practice in the Czech Republic, the development of professional portfolios and the development of a career system with teachers and headteachers in and across the Czech Republic.

All good practice learned is discussed at school level and at the appropriate year group level, carefully considered and, if deemed appropriate and within the principles of practice at the school, put into practice to improve the quality of learning and opportunities for the students.

What they say they believe is based on evidence from personal and public research and supported by sound argument. They put into practice their collective beliefs and sincerely promulgate good practice.

Factors facilitating collaboration	Factors hindering collaboration
An authentic school leader who models professional behaviour and a collaborative approach to decision-making.	Consensus takes time.
Appropriately qualified and experienced personnel in senior leadership and management (SLAM) team.	Need for education of parents and other members of the community in order that they follow the same principles.
The SLAM team know one another well got on well together and are determined and enthusiastic about the work in which they are involved.	
The undaunted enthusiasm and desire to learn the teachers at the school complements that of the SLAM team.	
Working on and writing together the policies and guidelines for practice, planning joint learning materials and manual. This joint activity draws people together.	
Regular opportunities to disseminate good practice and communication throughout the school.	
Staff recruitment and selection process.	
The tasks are distributed fairly among personnel to make the most of the skills and talent available to achieve the school's goals.	
Clearly-developed competences acquired by all.	

With nearly 30 years presence in the school, the constancy of principle and practice exhibited by the now school leader has clearly had an impact. There is a constant expectation that there will be transparency and the highest professional example of teacher competence in all activities. A final example, note of uncertainty but of sincerity in practice, was given by the senior Deputy headteacher. He told of a telephone call he had received one Saturday afternoon; it was from the headteacher. The headteacher was in a supermarket and had seen something that he believed might be useful for work within the school. He called the deputy to inform him about this particular item but would not purchase it without the agreement of the deputy. He genuinely believes and demonstrates in practice that joint decision-making means that no unilateral decisions are made that will have an impact on the school and its proper functioning. The deputy disagreed with the purchase and so it was not made.

At the end of the interview, I said my goodbye and thank you to the headteacher, who continued with his administrative task, the deputy took me from the still open doored office to the very welcome sight of the lift and to the main entrance of the school. Back outside the Impressive entrance to the school and facing the less impressive entrance to the University of New York in Prague, are you waiting for my taxi to arrive and contemplated how lucky I had been to have spent the last hour in a veritable place of learning. Learning and action on learning were at the heart and in the heart of those in the school.